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## Review – Walter Earl Fluker, *The Ground Has Shifted: The Future of the Black Church in Post-Racial America*

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***The Ground Has Shifted: The Future of the Black Church in Post-Racial America.* Walter Earl Fluker. New York: New York University Press, 2016. Xi, 312 pp. \$25.00. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1-4798-1038-3.**

Walter Fluker in *The Ground Has Shifted*, outlines and chronicles the challenges facing the contemporary churches we have historically called the "black church tradition." Using autobiographical vignettes, literary sources, academic, social science research, and a critical review of the history of the black church, Fluker describes the current issues and tasks confronting the black church in what some have called "post-racialized" America. The work is divided into three parts: 'Memory: Remembering Our Story'; 'Vision: Retelling Our Story'; and 'Mission: Reliving Our Story.' Fluker proposes that in 'our story' we can find and clarify our identity as African Americans. In finding our identity, we can find our way to a place we can claim as 'home.' Thus situated we can gather resources for hope in meeting the current dilemmas of these turbulent times in black communities around the world.

Fluker writes in part to respond to Princeton professor Eddie Glaude's indictment in the August 2010 Huffington Post article, "The Black Church is Dead." His analytical and detailed descriptions and methodical analysis of what brought African Americans as a whole and the black church specifically to this point of crisis are riveting. But, as Fluker emphasizes, it is not enough to remember. "The memories of the past are no longer adequate to sustain the mission of black churches in these turbulent times" (16). "The ground has shifted, and African Americans have perhaps lost something precious even as we appeared to have gained what so many had fought for, prayed for, hoped for, and died for" (44).

Fluker uses critical engagement and a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding our historical understandings to help us "think about the inherited burdens of race and culture in post-racial America." (17) Writing primarily for African American religious scholars and church leaders, he challenges us to forge a pathway forward for the now and future of the black church.

The use, meaning, and ramifications of the term 'post-racialism' are examined in the text. Fluker admits that the term masks an unrealized hope of black churches and communities of life without

racism. In *The Ground Has Shifted* he offers us ways to reframe the conversation to more adequately address what is at issue beneath the canopy of using such a term as “post-racialism”: “the historical problems of racialized, sexualized and gender politics” (120) both in the churches and the larger society. The term itself is a fantasy, invented to mask the historical trauma and damage to self-identity and agency of African Americans.

The ground has shifted; and, the historical role and identity of the now and future black church are called into question. What is to be said of the prophetic and liberating role of the black church today? What are we to do or be for these times, now and in the future? Fluker suggests a way forward by empowering leaders and scholars to use “tools of the spirit” to embrace hope. He offers a global vision of citizenship in Diasporas and exiles to help us see more clearly our “intersectionality of our complex and multidimensional oppressions.” (18) In lifting up tools to foster a sense of identity and human flourishing, he challenges black churches to provide these, starting now, beginning with a focus on young black males, given their desperate situation in US society.

The strength of the text is trifold:

- A literary style that combines the skillful use of autobiography, poetry, prose, and historical texts to pull the reader along a challenging path into a layered exploration of the past, present, and possible futures of the black church and oppressed peoples across the globe.
- The crafting of a framework and new language for reconsidering the identity, role, and impact of the black church traditionally viewed, its stymied present, and its future potentialities. The resulting strategy for a pathway forward is provocative.
- The interdisciplinary tapestry woven from critical theory, cultural analysis, historical-sociological studies and research, and the work of contemporary scholars that both support and challenge the hypotheses presented. The footnotes themselves are an excellent resource for scholars looking to expand their horizons.

This book is a great read and a provocative proposal for responding to the challenges that confront black Americans. However, the text could

be a challenging read for those unfamiliar with some of the technical language or academic jargon. But it is well worth the challenge, even as some struggle to expand their vocabulary.

Helpful for Black Catholics who don't know exactly where they fit regarding what is considered the black church tradition, Fluker presents the issues as fitting more broadly the African American dilemma within the history of the US and the African diaspora and oppressed peoples across the globe. The models for a pathway forward speak to black church leaders and scholars and leaders within black communities in general.

This text is a must read for all of us struggling to find a language and new frameworks for dealing with the complexities of life in times like these for black communities across the US. It is even worth gathering a group of friends, scholars, and church leaders to wrestle with how to respond to the challenges presented.

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