

April 2014

## In the Matter of Race and Religion

Regennia N. Williams  
*Cleveland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb>



Part of the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

**How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!**

---

### Recommended Citation

Williams, Regennia N. (2014) "In the Matter of Race and Religion," *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*: Vol. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb/vol1/iss1/7>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Michael Schwartz Library at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

# Book Review

## In the Matter of Race and Religion

by Regennia N. Williams

Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler, editors

*The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions*

(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 288 pp., \$24.95.

In 1944, the publication of Arthur Huff Fauset's *Black Gods of the Metropolis* signaled the beginning of a new era in the historiography of African American religion. Unlike other scholarly studies on this topic, Fauset chose to focus not on the mainline (predominantly Protestant) experiences of African Americans, but the cults and sects that were often marginalized. In suggesting that that these groups, far from being aberrations, were vibrant and attractive components of the African American religious landscape, Fauset challenged the conclusions in the sociological studies by such luminaries as W.E.B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier. In one slender, ethnographic, anthropological study, Fauset gave readers a rare glimpse of the diversity of African American religions in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

In a similar fashion, Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler, editors of *The New*

*Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions*, offer a thought-provoking 21<sup>st</sup>-century look at religious diversity in African America. The contributors succeed in placing Fauset's life within the larger context of the evolution of African American culture in the first half of the twentieth century. The son of an African American father—and A.M.E. minister—and a mother whose parents had converted from Judaism to Christianity, Fauset is himself a study in religious and cultural diversity. Like his sister Jessie Redmon Fauset, Arthur Huff Fauset contributed to African American arts and letter during the Harlem Renaissance. The brother's choice of African American "cults" as the subjects of his 1939 research suggests that he continued to hold in high regard the cultures of the African American masses.

For editors Curtis and Sigler, Fauset's theoretical work in 1944 was "truly innovative

and truly courageous,” since he “imagined a black religious world in which African Americans themselves, not the ‘Black Church’ or Christianity, were at the center of African American religious activity.” This eleven-chapter collection is replete with references to familiar works by W. E. B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, Carter G. Woodson, Melville Hertskovits, Wilson Jeremiah Moses, Milton Sernett, C. Eric Lincoln and others. It is worth noting however, that the contributors to the subject volume provide in-depth analyses of ideas associated with religious leaders whose ministries receive very little if any attention in earlier studies of African American religion.

The volume includes, for example, detailed discussions of Bishop Charles M. “Daddy” Grace and the United House of Prayer for All People, the historic roots of Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple, and the place of Music in Father Divine’s Peace Mission Movement.

Gender issues also receive careful attention in Clarence E. Hardy III’s chapter, “Fauset’s (Missing) Pentecostals: Church Mothers, Remaking Respectability, and Religious Modernism.” Here, one finds the story of relatively higher numbers of African American women in leadership roles in local, regional, and national Pentecostal groups. For Hardy this is no minor point, since “the story of black religious women’s assertive entrance into the public arena is at the center of black Pentecostalism’s emergence as an urban religion

from its beginnings in the Mississippi Delta and border South.”

What began as Fauset’s dissertation research in the late 1930s remains one of the most significant 20<sup>th</sup>-century studies of African American religions. The established and emerging scholars whose essays comprise *The New Black Gods* have done their part to ensure that this message is not lost on 21<sup>st</sup>-century students of religion. ❖