

Jonathan L. Walton. *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2009. 283 pages. \$23.

In *Watch This!*, Jonathan L. Walton provides a social ethical analysis of African American religious broadcasting in a contemporary megachurch context, highlighting the ministries of televangelists Bishops T.D. Jakes, Eddie Long, and Pastors Creflo and Taffi Dollar. He reflects on the social implications of these media ministries to determine what impact they may have on the lives of Americans in general and African Americans in particular.

The structure of the book is threefold. First, in chapters one and two, Walton does not begin immediately with the particularities of the electronic media megaministries under discussion, but rather he begins with a historical account of black religious broadcasting. He does so as a way of demonstrating that black religious broadcasting has been present for generations through recording and radio industries, though it has not been discussed in any meaningful way by media scholars or within African American religious studies. Walton grounds this historical perspective with the account of televangelist Rev. Ike who was a forerunner for contemporary black televangelism. Thus, the current phenomenon of black televangelism is a by-product of Rev. Ike through the continuity of certain cultural practices and religious ideas of the past.

In chapters three to six, Walton attempts to describe the theologies and key phenomenological traits of black religious broadcasting as expressed in the distinct forms represented by the leading black televangelists, Bishop T.D. Jakes, Bishop Eddie Long, and Pastors Creflo and Taffi Dollar, a Neo-Pentecostal, Charismatic mainline, and Word of Faith Christian, respectively. In the final chapters, Walton asserts an ideological critique of African American religious broadcasting in a balanced way by revealing how televangelism may be a “ritual of self-affirmation” while at the same time being a “ritual of social accommodation” (Jonathan Walton, 15). The latter includes three myths—myth of American success, myth of black victimology, and myth of the “Strong Black Man”—that are explored in relation to the ministries of Jakes, Long, and the Dollars. In the end, Walton demonstrates how these media ministries may help and hurt viewers.

This is actually one of the key strengths of Walton’s book—he affirms and takes seriously the contributions of pop cultural black voices of Christianity that have traditionally been muted at least in scholarly conversations; yet, he still critiques and challenges them to not perpetuate the detrimental myths he mentions. Walton engages mass Christianity and places it within the confines of the study of black religion and African American theological education in particular because it is a valid expression of black faith. This is his way of overcoming the bifurcation in black life between the academic study of religion and the everyday practice of religion. Furthermore, these televised megachurches, rooted in “spirit” traditions, broaden the conversation about whom or what makes up the so-called Black Church. Even though they appear to be at a distance from the civil rights era of the Church, they should not solely be criticized for their prosperity gospel for instance, but also should be appreciated for their technological savvy and sophistication. One must ask, “What can be learned from these corners of the Black Church?” Walton helps ignite this conversation within the Black community and exemplifies through his research that the Black Church is not monolithic. His presentation is critically constructive and evolves in a nuanced balanced manner while charting a new path in the academic study of African American religion by focusing on black religious broadcasters, especially their biographies, theologies, ecclesial perspectives, and

sociopolitical thinking. What Walton recognizes, however, is that the voices of black women are missing from this leadership domain of the Church, because (though women make up the majority of the Church) black congregations are still primarily led by men. This patriarchal power is true for contemporary televangelism too; thus, what is presented in this book is in fact black *male* religious broadcasting.

For instance, Taffi Dollar is named as the focus of the chapter with her husband Creflo, but it is Creflo who gets “page time” and a photo in this book. Pastor Taffi seems like an “add-on,” especially since she is not even used in the subheadings of the chapter, as is done with her husband, even though she is supposed to be the subject along with her husband. This approach does not seem to take the ministry of Taffi Dollar seriously, though we hear of her a bit. It is clear that her husband is the headlining minister and pastor.

I appreciate Walton’s attempt to include a woman at all, but it may be helpful to speak in more detail about these televangelists’ relationship with women in general and their wives in particular and how they relate to them in the media ministry. That way, women who represent the majority of Church membership may play a greater role in this project. As is, this book may only perpetuate the patriarchy of the Church it seeks to resist. Moreover, if black women televangelists are not as prominent as the black men, Walton may consider the future option of comparing the media ministries of certain white women televangelists, who have black followings, such as Paula White and Joyce Meyers, to the black male religious broadcasters he has studied. At least, this may give women a stronger voice.

Nonetheless, Walton presents a spectacular piece of contemporary scholarship on the Black Church and media. He asserts that this work is foremost a scholarly work in Christian social ethics but the reader will find that it is more than that. It is an attempt to bridge the person in the pulpit, pew, and classroom in such a way that the only song that can be sung is “blest be the ties that bind.”

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