

FOREWORD

African American theological discourse has changed over the course of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. From a rather strict preoccupation with race/racism, it has grown to include a much richer understanding of the “web-like” nature of oppression and the various ways in which we encounter the world. Scholars participating in this discourse have struggled with the nature and meaning of their work, the proper audience for their writings, and the meaning of their commitments for life in the academy. Much of this wrestling has centered on the substance of black life—the described details of this existence. Less attention, however, has been given to the theoretical underpinning and methodological commitments that shadow the work of these scholars: What is the nature and meaning of the experience that centers publications, lectures, and conversations on African American religion, and how does one theologize regarding this experience? Several works hint at such questions, but full attention has been wanting.

This book has been a good number of years in the making, but it is well worth the wait. Beginning to outline a necessary shift in the theological and ethical sensibilities informing African American theology in particular and African American religious studies in general through his earlier *Ontological Blackness*, Anderson here presents the next logical step—a theological program that interrogates the messy and complex nature of religious experience. Yet the book you hold is not simply a consequence of Anderson’s interrogation of black theology’s inner logic, its primary concerns and structures. Rather, it also owes a debt to his comment to pragmatism, particularly his concern with a “monistic conception of experience.” For Anderson, theology is a way to interpret the complexities and thickness of religious experience—pointing all the time toward relationality and a longing for a richness of life as the “Beloved Community.” *Creative Exchange* unpacks the ambiguities of experience in ways that celebrate its unresolved tensions and paradoxes.

Creative Exchange is not simply the title of this book. Rather, it also captures the process, the manner in which theology does it work, the way in which theology provides rich interpretation of religious experience, keeping our focus on the “unresolved ambiguities” of life, as Anderson puts it.

In spite of what one might think after reading his earlier books, race is not removed as a category of investigation. Rather, consistent with his earlier work, Anderson understands race as a deep symbol that must not be flattened or rendered ontological in nature, but understood as simply one dimension of experience. Such a stance opens *Creative Exchange* to a wide array of source materials and perspectives that challenge black and womanist theologies. Yet it is a challenge that also calls for conversation, for dialogue, and such an appeal frames each chapter of this splendid book.

This book suggests the strengths and capacity of theological inquiry to wrestle in productive ways with the nature and meaning of African American religious experience. While respecting and insightfully presenting earlier takes on the topic, this book suggests a cartography of deep thinking that exposes new perspectives and alternate approaches.

It is the creativity of this book that appealed to us first, and it is because of the manner in which Anderson so brilliantly pushes scholarship on African American religion forward that we are delighted to have it as the first book in this new series, “Innovations: African American Religious Thought.” In his writing, Anderson captures the concern for innovation, for new approaches, new perspectives, and new possibilities for the study of African American religious thought and life that shape this series.

We are certain you will be challenged and inspired by the sharp scholarship that marks this book.

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