In this ethnographic study of black evangelical religious kinship, Todne Thomas, associate professor of African American religious studies at Harvard Divinity School, offers a welcome and compelling window into a faith community all too often obscured in the US racial-religious landscape. In contrast to wider scholarship that too often propounds “the monolithic construct of the ‘Black Church’” (p. 13), Thomas insightfully traces how both white evangelical and Afro-diasporic influences shape the worldview of black evangelicals, with a particular eye toward their language and practice of spiritual relationality and “family.” Thus, the book hinges on Thomas's examination of “kincraft”—a “collective relational ethos” driving black evangelical visions of family to stretch beyond popular “Christian constructs of nuclear kinship” and “the heteronormative family” (p. 5). Identifying this concept of kincraft as “an Afro-diasporic religious phenomenon” (p. 15), she illustrates how black evangelical sociality both reproduces and challenges elements of white mainstream US evangelicalism and evangelical family values.

Thomas's analysis centers on two Atlanta-area black evangelical congregations: Corinthian Bible Chapel (CBC), a majority African American church, and its “sister church,” Dixon Bible Chapel (DBC), which is predominately Afro-Caribbean in membership. More than a year of participant-observation, as well as interviews and other archival research, undergirds her detailed and nuanced look at the life of these congregations. Dividing her six-chapter analysis into two equal parts, Thomas designs part 1 to examine the larger historical, ideological, and ethno-racial contexts for CBC and DBC members’ expressions of kinship and evangelicalism, before turning in part 2 to a series of narrower ethnographic portraits illustrating the day-to-day practices of kincraft within these black evangelical communities.

Chapter 1 locates the CBC and DBC evangelicals’ expansive views of spiritual kinship—their construction of one another as, for instance, “spiritual parents,” “spiritual children,” “brothers and sisters in Christ,” and so on—as an intersection of three major worldviews: the ecclesiology of the Plymouth Brethren tradition from which these congregations trace their roots, the neo-evangelical moral emphasis on the normative nuclear and heteropatriarchal family, and Afro-diasporic practices of nonbiological kinship. While members of CBC and DBC reflect typical neo-evangelical attitudes regarding the moral value of the nuclear
family and the perceived threat of secular culture, they also uphold the Brethren concept of universal Christian relatedness and Afro-diasporic notions of extended kinship to create a “relational ethos” that is “not easily compartmentalized,” but which still functions to attend to “the material and political conditions shaped by racialization” (p. 54). This leads immediately into the subject of chapter 2, a fascinating historical analysis of the missionary work of CBC’s and DBC’s founder, Brethren evangelist T. Michael Flowers, an Afro-Bahamian whose mission took him from the Caribbean to Michigan and eventually to the American South. Flowers's Brethrenism continually pressed his ministry toward the idea of universal Christian family and led him to criticize the racialized religion he encountered in the South—both the segregated exclusivism of white churches as well as the avowedly black religious contexts that had arisen as a result of racism and racialization.

Such an outlook from the churches’ founder sets the stage for chapter 3’s consideration of the interplay between religious kinship and racial identity. While the members of CBC and DBC “consider shared spiritual kinship rather than ethnicity and race to be the most authentic basis for their group identity” (p. 83), nevertheless, racial experiences and dynamics still impact the expressions of spiritual kinship. For one thing, their twin experiences of racial exclusion from white evangelicals (on account of their race) and religious marginalization from other black Christians (on account of their perceived proximity to the whiteness of mainstream evangelicalism) provide black evangelicals with the common social experience of possessing a “doubly minoritized” identity (p. 92). But even so, the evangelicals of CBC and DBC also negotiate internal ethnic distinctions that affect congregational and interpersonal boundaries. Ethnic tensions between African American and Afro-Caribbean evangelicals, which Thomas ties in part to these different groups using different “grammars of blackness” (p. 97), evidently played a role in DBC splitting off as a separate congregation from CBC in 1991. Yet an attitude of institutional silence about ethnic differences, at least in the hearing of outsiders, also marked this as a family affair, thus representing a generative strategy of sociality and kinship. Even amid ethnic tensions, these black evangelicals understood their common religious identity to represent “an ‘otherness’ than can be chosen” (p. 104), in contrast to other social identities, and thus Thomas warns that scholars “must resist the uncritical application of ethno-religious and racio-religious lenses that try to define black evangelical communities straightforwardly as the product of ethnic and racial formations” (p. 84).

As Thomas transitions into part 2, the sharper focus on quotidian examples of kincraft in CBC and DBC life becomes immediately evident as a major strength. Chapter 4 traces connections between the community’s biblicism and gendered ideals of brotherhood, drawing a constellation between biblical literalism, fraternalism, and gendered ideas of institutional authority. Bible studies and other Bible-based rituals function as markers of religious belonging, spaces of community formation and socialization, and sites that reify the expectation of male leadership and the shared fraternal labor of biblical interpretation. Thus the textual practices, within a framework of literalist interpretation, create “gendered zones of spiritual kinship” within the community. With this in mind, chapter 5 moves to consider the ways that churchwomen craft spiritual relationships and connect the church to the day-to-day functions of the domestic sphere. Suggesting that DBC sisters’ domestic labors might be reconsidered in a sacramental framework, Thomas presents the churchwomen’s daily practices of “walking together,” visiting one another, cooking for one another, and other forms of hospitality as “the corporealization of community” (pp. 146-147). Moreover, churchwomen’s practice of “experiential rituals” of “everyday religious kinship”—practices like creating networks of “prayer partnerships” or ment-
orrying younger Christians through “spiritual motherhood”—illustrate the types of influence and spiritual authority available to black evangelical churchwomen, even in an ecclesiastical context that centers male pastoral leadership. Finally, chapter 6 explores the tensions at play as black evangelicals embrace the mainstream heteronormative nuclear family ideal amid a discursive landscape that often forwards the trope of the “dysfunctional black family” as a major element of American discourses about the proper boundaries of “the family” (p. 170). Thomas argues that black evangelicals mobilize spiritual kinship through “the creation of emergent networks of support” and “confessional intimacy” to navigate this landscape (p. 195); such an approach allows them to also interject critical visions of the US racial-religious landscape, as when T. Michael Flowers expressed that neo-evangelical focus on “the family” was “displacing a proper prioritization of God-focused piety, salvation, and evangelism” (p. 177).

Among the obvious strengths of Thomas’s work are the significant scholarly interventions and the compelling intimate portraits generated by her methodological approach. Her foregrounding of black evangelicals as a group to be seriously studied rather than marginalized or ignored forwards considerations of diversity within the ranks of both evangelicalism and black Christianity—group identities that are often treated as largely monolithic. She makes this point deftly when considering the variety of political perspectives she observed within DBC and CBC during the 2008 presidential election cycle, noting that black evangelicals “cannot be neatly mapped onto the political axis of the Right, nor can black Christians in the US be located on the Left, or depicted as prioritizing a single set of ‘racial’ or ‘religious’ sentiments or positions in the election process” (p. 12). In addition to the needful focus on black evangelicals, within the realm of kinship studies Thomas’s work also offers a self-conscious and powerful critique of the language of “fictive kinship.” She argues that describing nonbiological familial ties as “fictive” marginalizes these kinship practices as nonnormative and functionally “delegitimizes some of the social ties that have been vital to black social life” (p. 49). The book makes a strong case for the legitimacy of the ties of “spiritual kinship” as not merely “fictive,” but as real, binding, and legitimate. These arguments are reinforced by the strength of Thomas’s fieldwork, which entailed more than a year of interviews and participant-observation. Many of the most poignant, compelling, and convincing moments in the book come from the words or actions of the members of CBC and DBC themselves, mediated through Thomas’s interviews or keen observations. As a result, these black evangelicals emerge as real people, three-dimensional figures, rather than stereotypes or caricatures.

At the same time, prospective readers must also consider that the book is heavily theorized, leading at times to pages that are dense with terminology that may not be easy or familiar to a popular, non-academic audience. On the one hand, this does help situate the work deeply within a wide array of scholarly discourses, but it also potentially limits the appeal to those without specialization or scholarly background. Moreover, Thomas’s treatment of spiritual kinship and evangelicalism raises additional questions about the disjunctions and potential overlaps between black and white evangelicals. For instance, terminology like “brothers and sisters in Christ,” “spiritual parents,” “prayer partners,” and so on can also be found in various white evangelical circles. While Thomas convincingly demonstrates the significance of these kinship ties in black evangelical life, including their significance in the context of a racialized US culture, it would be fascinating and helpful to evaluate the similarities and differences in how black and white evangelicals utilize and conceptualize these expressions of spiritual family. Perhaps this could be an avenue for future scholarship to build on Thomas’s work.
Ultimately, *Kincraft* represents a welcome and significant step forward in the study of both American evangelicalism and black Christianity. It brings a degree of nuance and complexity to issues that are often treated as straightforward, and encourages readers to reconsider their assumptions about the relationship between racial identity, religious identity, politics, culture, and conceptions of what it means to be “family.” While best suited for an academic audience, the book’s overarching conclusions and its compelling ethnographic portraits of black evangelicals represent points of interest for wider audiences as well.

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