

Hans A. Baer. *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism.*
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The Black Spiritual Movement Revisited

Hans A. Baer's 1984 *The Black Spiritual Movement* was one of the first studies to focus explicitly on the Black Spiritual tradition in the United States. Baer attempted to challenge the then-prominent stereotype of African American Spiritual churches as fronts for a variety of illicit activities and possessors of an incoherent system of beliefs, as well as the idea of a monolithic "black church." The book, now in its second edition, continues to be relevant for students of African American religion and may also be of interest to those studying other manifestations of Spiritualism in the United States.

In addition to the original text, Baer offers a preface to the second edition, epilogue, and expanded bibliography. The new preface gives readers an autobiographical account of the ethnographies Baer conducted from the fall of 1977 through the winter of 1981 among African American Spiritual churches, primarily in Nashville, Tennessee. In an effort to enter contemporary conversations on ethnography, particularly among social scientists studying religion, Baer de-

tails the various ethical and moral choices he confronted during the course of his research. Baer provides the background for his discussion by placing the Spiritual movement in the context of African American religious history, focusing particularly on religious change during the Great Migration. He next describes the "social organization" of the movement as well as the organization and activities of the individual churches he visited. The strength of Baer's work lies in the detailed accounts of the churches and services he attended. He vividly describes the variety of experiences that occur under the broad heading of Spiritualism.

Baer's chapter on the Father Hurley sect, though disruptive to the flow of the book, is compelling and readable as Baer makes a convincing argument to include Father Hurley in the pantheon of "Black Gods of the Metropolis." Baer resumes the topic of Father Hurley at the end of the two successive chapters, attempting to integrate his discussion of Father Hurley and his Universal Hagar's Spiritual Church into discussions of religious syncretism and religious responses to racial

stratification. The subtitle of the work may be a bit misleading as Baer's exploration of Spiritualism as "a religious response to racism" seems to be a secondary goal of the text and comprises only one chapter of the book.

Baer strives to demonstrate the diversity of African American religious experiences and succeeds. He offers a brief history of African American religious traditions in the United States as well as descriptions of various institutions that all fall under the umbrella of "Black Spiritualism." In doing so, however, Baer does not provide a cohesive explanation or definition of Spiritual churches. Part of this failure stems from the very characteristics of the churches themselves. As Baer explains, "the Black Spiritual movement has no central organization to coordinate or define its structural content, beliefs, activities, and membership requirements" (p. 43). Nevertheless, it is left to the reader to discern exactly what the churches that Baer studies have in common, an issue made problematic by his documentation of the diversity that exists within Spiritualism itself.

The book's difficulties are primarily organizational and it feels, at times, like a series of articles or papers compiled into a monograph. In addition to occasional repetition from chapter to chapter, the book lacks a feeling of continuity or central purpose. Though Baer's effort to provide a history of the African American spiritual movement is necessarily complicated by the fact that the movement itself lacks centralization, his discussion of the history of the movement in different chapters makes it difficult for the reader to get a clear picture of the evolution of African American spiritualism. Baer's account of the history of African American Spiritual movement appears three chapters before his discussion of "White" spiritualism despite his explanation that "American Spiritualism served as the springboard for the present Black Spiritual Movement" (p. 113).

The new epilogue details Baer's work since the publication of *The Black Spiritual Movement*,

including an exploration of the role of women in Spiritualism. Though Baer touches on the predominance of women leaders in the original text, the epilogue provides a helpful and more thorough analysis of their role in Spiritual churches. In his epilogue and updated bibliography, Baer also documents a number of works on Spiritualism that have been published in the years between the two editions.

The impact of *The Black Spiritual Movement*, in the almost twenty years since its publication, perhaps can best be seen through the fact that Baer's call to acknowledge the diversity of African American religious experiences, while studying less "mainstream" denominations, has been answered. More and more academics, from a variety of fields, have turned their attention to documenting the African American religious diversity and challenging, alongside Baer, the idea of a monolithic "Black Church."

Ironically, so much attention has been paid to African American religion outside of major denominations that in his 1997 study of African American religion and the Great Migration, *Bound for the Promised Land*, Milton Sernett explained: "I consciously highlight the mainline African American denominations because of the inordinate attention that scholarly and popular accounts of the period between the two world wars have given to what is commonly termed 'the rise of the cults and sects.'"[1] Thus in addition to remaining one of relatively few texts devoted entirely to the Black Spiritual movement, Baer's work functions as a reminder of the movement and direction of African American religious studies in the years since it was first published.

Note

[1]. Milton Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 7

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