



The Bahá'í Faith and the Black Intelligentsia: Race, Religion, and Nation by Christopher Buck (review)

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Reviews

Americans' mental health that deemphasizes religion as the primary cause of disease.

One of this book's outstanding contributions is the way that Weisenfeld brings into central focus the fact that psychiatric theorization was not (merely) academic. She crucially contextualizes the White doctors theorizing Black religion and madness within their biographies, showing the personal connections these medical professionals had to slavery and normative White religions and the influence those violent and racializing systems had on their psychiatric work. She makes clear that their theories had practical effects on the bodily freedoms of individual Black folks and were also used as part of the justifications for limiting the rights and freedoms of African Americans as a group.

The book, though, left this reader with questions about the broader implications of the history of the racializing effects of theorizing religion that the book tracks so carefully for the Psychology of Religion and Study of Religion in general, and the ways in which we might ethically engage in theorizing today. Further, with its keen eye for detail and attention to wider historical trends, this book adds something significant to the emerging field of the Study of Disability and Religion. At the same time, there is scant explicit discussion of disability as a category or engagement with Disability Studies, which also seemed like a missed opportunity.

This book makes major contributions to the fields of Religious Studies, African American Studies, the Study of Africana Religions, the Psychology of Religion, and Disability Studies. It is accessibly written and would be a great addition to both undergraduate and graduate courses in African American religions, Religion in the United States, Religion and Disability, or Religion and Colonialism. The book is an excellent, detailed historical analysis of the ways in which doctors working in the service of a racist regime used a discourse of race, religion, and the normal body-mind in order to construct "mad Black religion" and so regulate the lives of African Americans.

Alexander Rocklin, Kenyon College

The Bahá'í Faith and the Black Intelligentsia: Race, Religion, and Nation. By Christopher Buck. Kalimát Press, 2025. 317 pages. \$29.95 softcover.

The history of African American scholarship is inseparable from the struggle for racial equality. Christopher Buck's new anthology illuminates the largely unknown role played by the Bahá'í Faith—an independent world religion founded in what was then Persia in 1844, during the height of American slavery—in the philosophies of seminal Black thinkers.

Buck focuses on the scholars W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) and Alain Locke (1885–1954), the newspaper publisher Robert Sengstacke Abbott (1870–1940), and the poet Robert Hayden (1913–1980). The latter three were members of the Bahá'í Faith while Du Bois was an admirer who gave significant attention to the Bahá'í Faith in his widely followed publications and writings.

The Bahá'í Faith and the Black Intelligentsia includes an introduction by Richard W. Thomas, professor emeritus of history at Michigan State University and a mentor of Buck, who is a prolific author of Bahá'í-inspired materials. Buck begins his new book with an account of the 1912 visit to America by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), son of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, during which he shared the foundational principles of racial equality and unity of humanity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's activities received widespread press coverage and thousands of people attended his talks. Many of the public events were intentionally and conspicuously integrated, with Black guests receiving an honored treatment that was almost unheard of at that time. Buck spends considerable time on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's descriptions of Bahá'u'lláh's "pupil of the eye" simile, which describes Black people as "the source of light" and possessed of special insight that can reflect the human condition. Buck cites detailed translations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's original Arabic, then explores the subtle and expressive nuances, characteristic of that language, which deepen the metaphor and power of the message. Buck also skillfully describes the Bahá'í framework in which, rather than imposing an unrealistic "color-blind" standard on the oppressed, "race is both acknowledged, yet deconstructed in the larger scheme of race relations" (38).

This unique vision sheds considerable light on the work of Hayden, who during America's 1976 bicentennial held the position now called the nation's poet laureate. Hayden was criticized by some Black intellectuals for declining to employ overtly Black themes or style, yet viewed through the lens of his Bahá'í beliefs, the logic and utility of Hayden's approach is elevated.

The best-known of Buck's subjects is Du Bois, the leading Black intellectual of the early twentieth century, who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his 1912 trip to America. Also prominent is Locke, known as the father of the Harlem Renaissance. It cannot be overstated how unusual the Bahá'í focus on racial equality was for the early twentieth century, when many mainstream religious institutions were at the forefront of segregation. This explains why the arrival of the Bahá'í Faith in America was trumpeted by headlines in major publications such as the NAACP's *Crisis*, which was edited by Du Bois; Abbott's *Chicago Defender*; the legendary *Pittsburgh Courier*; *The New York Times*, and others.

Buck's research is extraordinarily detailed and convincing. He reconstructs how the four main subjects were introduced to and influenced

by the Bahá'í Faith. Each of the eight chapters are derived from a previously published, peer-reviewed book chapter or journal article, with some additional research, so some of this new anthology is repetitive. But by gathering the material in one place, Buck develops a more than six-decade timeline of Black Bahá'í thought.

Buck also offers valuable clarification of Du Bois' brief yet public disenchantment with the Bahá'ís, which was born of faulty information. He includes a Du Bois quote that should be studied alongside all of his scholarly contributions:

First of all, if I were going to join a religious organization I should certainly be strongly tempted to join the Bahai [sic] movement because of its broad principles, its international and inter-racial program. Even its aberrations in the past have been human and understandable and nothing that I now hold against it (121).

Particularly striking is Buck's quotation of Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) placing Du Bois and Locke alongside Plato and Aristotle in the realm of philosophers. As those ancient Greeks were foundational to that civilization, so should great Black thinkers reside alongside America's founders, due to how they pushed this country to fulfill its democratic ideals. For all who study the history of African American thought and religion, *The Bahá'í Faith and the Black Intelligentsia* offers a new and undeniable source of knowledge and inspiration.

Jesse Washington, Independent Scholar

Geographies of Religious Spaces and Sacred Landscapes. Edited by Darius Liutikas. Edward Elgar, 2025. xii + 253 pages. \$155.00 hardcover; ebook available.

Geographies of Religious Spaces and Sacred Landscapes is an eclectic volume, with chapters from authors in the fields of human geography, architecture, heritage and tourism studies, theology, sociology, art history, and political science. The overarching theme is the persistence of sacred space through social transformation. Most chapters focus on European sites, although a few range further afield—to Balinese temples, Latter-day Saints temples, Hindu pilgrimage sites, the Mayan legacy in Mérida, Mexico, and the development of a Franciscan “Hermitage of Silence” on a Mexican volcano.

The chapters tend to be descriptive, eschewing theory for overviews of various locations, constructions such as sanctuaries and synagogues, and regions and landscapes with religiously significant features. The result is enjoyable to read, a brisk tour of the diverse places that attract