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"Black Methodists Holding a Prayer Meeting" by Pavel Petrovich Svinin, circa 1811-1813 (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



by Diana L. Hayes

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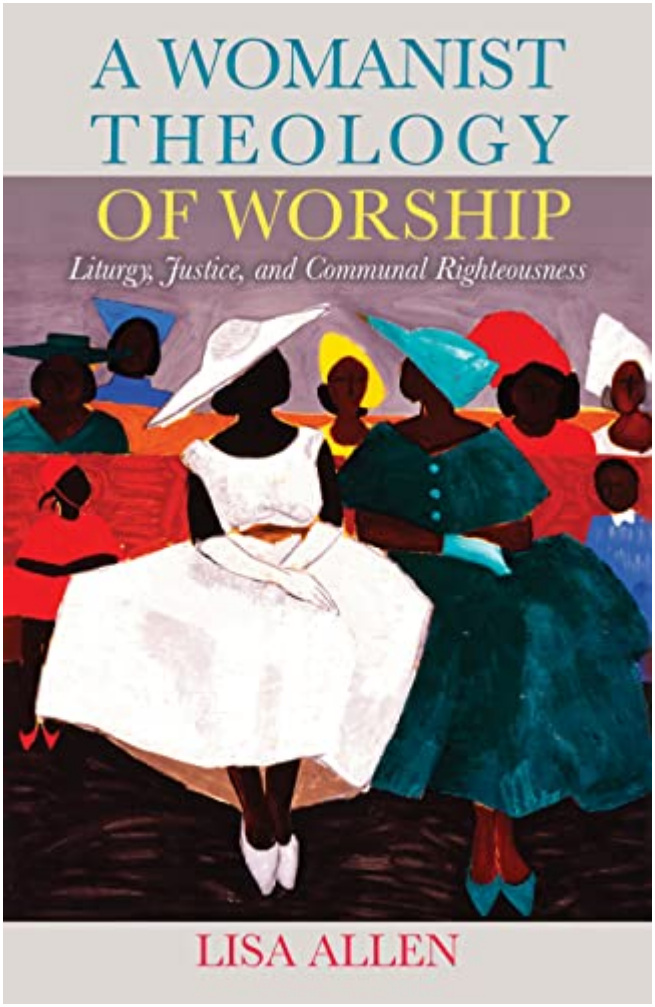
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What would Sunday worship look like if done from a womanist perspective? How would it differ from the Sunday worship experience we share today, whether Protestant or Catholic, African American, white or Hispanic?



A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness
Lisa Allen
231 pages; Orbis Books; 2021
$28.00

Womanist theology today has come a mighty long way from its earliest beginnings in response to Alice Walker's lifting up of the term "womanist." It began with Black women and women of color exploring what exactly the term meant and who it was or was not referring to. Was it a term designated for Black women alone, women of color or both? Was womanist theology and thought a part or subset of feminist

theology and thought or was it able to stand on its own?

Today, many womanists, like myself, have dropped Walker's reference to Black feminists and see ourselves simply as womanists. It is, of course, a matter of choice.

As the decades passed, womanist theological scholars, working independently of feminists and scholars of womanist thought, have carved out an area of scholarship that is innovative, historical and theologically sound. Today, womanist theologians have moved beyond the basics of exploring what womanist theology is and could be to exploring new and, as yet, undefined areas of theological scholarship that can serve as breakthroughs toward new ideas and understandings. Lisa Allen's new book, *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness*, is a groundbreaking work that explores areas hitherto unexamined. It is long overdue but very welcome because it enables Black women to speak in terms of a much-needed renewal of thought and action, not just in the historically Black Church, but in churches where Blacks are present, but not in the majority.

For decades, African Americans have been exploring what it means to be church. How do we live out our understandings of church in a world increasingly secular and more interested, or so it seems, in raising money for the pastor's or bishop's various pet projects than in proclaiming the Word and being of God in ways that heal, feed, nurture, inspire and create community? How do we commit ourselves to doing justice as part of our Sunday liturgies?

Historically, Black Americans, like their African ancestors, have believed in the understanding of ubuntu: "I am because we are; we are because I am." There was, historically, a sense of solidarity in our strivings for a better life, education and future. It seems that we have lost or are in danger of losing that critical self-understanding that enabled us to survive slavery, Jim and Jane Crow, Reconstruction and its defeat up to the present day. Today, we seem more interested in what "I" as an individual can do or achieve rather than how "we," as a people, are able to survive.

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This is not true for the author. Allen explores the history and legacy of Black worship from its beginnings in slavery to the present day, exploring what she describes as a legacy that we cannot afford to forget or lose. Mainline Protestant churches are "fighting for survival" today as parishioners complain that Sunday liturgies are "boring, dry, dead, or static," Allen writes. To understand what seems to be happening, she explores these liturgies as well as the historical legacy of Black worship over the centuries. A major problem with most, she notes, is that they are "based on white supremacist evangelical models that focus on individual conversion and salvation" rather than a communal perspective that includes all, from the poorest to the wealthiest.

A Womanist Theology of Worship includes ten chapters in three parts. "Part One: Liturgical Legacy" touches on the importance of liturgy and the African roots of the Black Church, and African Liturgical Practices. Part Two explores the development of Black Liturgy in five chapters, beginning with understanding Black Liturgy and ending with the Unbroken Circle. Part Three brings all of these topics and themes together, with Allen laying the foundations of a Womanist Liturgical Theology, and closes with a Womanist liturgical theology. These chapters reveal her exhaustive yet focused research to speak to Black America regarding its long journey from captivity to freedom and the critical role that the liturgy has played in enabling us today to stand tall, strong and free, worshipping our God in ways that speak to our needs as a people of a long-held faith who continue to seek the ways in which we can "walk together, children, don't you get weary."

She points to several factors, which, she writes, prevent Black congregations from revising their liturgies in ways that appeal to and satisfy their people. These include: the belief in the inferiority of Blackness and the superiority of whiteness, the fear of being seen as uncivilized and the fear of liberation itself. It is necessary for us as a people of faith to reclaim our communal and spiritual authority by reclaiming our African ancestral legacies.

So, what needs to be done?

Allen provides us "a new paradigm" that reveals a womanist lens for reimagining liturgy. She explores liturgical theology and develops a "womanist liturgical theology that centers on African and African-descended cosmological and theological world-views and spiritualities, affirms full embodiment in worship, employs womanist

hermeneutics in all worship elements, and womanist hermeneutics/spirituality of communal empowerment and agency."

She closes by revealing a new womanist liturgical theology, which addresses the violence done to Black bodies over the last four centuries that has resulted in disembodied worship and a disconnect between prophetic witness and lived protest. It is up to the churches to rediscover this heritage and use it to recover the prophetic voice of Black religious America to provide a way forward for us all.

This work is badly needed and long overdue. It is long past time that we re-examined the role of Black worship in the Black community and cleansed it of its false messages of greed and prosperity to reclaim it for what it has always been: the voice and actions of a people seeking justice, seeking liberation, seeking peace.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 29-May 12, 2022** print issue under the headline: Book reclaims communal, spiritual authority through African legacies.