

In 2003 rapper/producer Kanye West released his debut album *The College Dropout*, which was eventually nominated for ten Grammy awards. West received special acclaim, however, for his controversial hit “Jesus Walks.” While the song’s lyrics arguably qualify the song as Gospel music—it received a nomination (that was later revoked) for a Stellar award and West performed for at least one church youth conference—what proved more remarkable was the popularity that it achieved with mainstream “secular” audiences. For months “Jesus Walks” played on radio stations across the nation, and the three versions of the song’s video were MTV and BET favorites. Additionally, one could find partygoers moving to the song’s haunting baselines at any number of nightclubs. Although unique, the crossover appeal of “Jesus Walks” certainly had precedence. Exactly twenty years earlier, Tremaine Hawkins, granddaughter of a Church of God in Christ (COGIC) bishop, recorded “Fall Down” (1983), an R&B-inflected gospel song that enjoyed similar success. Unlike her more traditional gospel recordings, including such classics as “Change” and “Goin’ Up Yonder,” “Fall Down” provided Hawkins access to mainstream radio and led her to minister in nightclubs alongside secular artists such as The Jackson Five and Diana Ross.

The complex questions and strange alliances formed at the intersections of religion, race, and “popular” culture have perplexed many for years. For anyone interested in sorting through such queries, the two recently published books under review are extremely helpful resources. Although different in method and materials employed, both works provide a wealth of insight into the contested history of race, religion, and music in American culture.

Jackson’s historical study investigates the development of gospel music as a lens into black culture in the United States. She writes:

> As a black religious music that enjoyed great commercial acclaim, gospel came to inhabit multiple worlds, serving as a meeting point for sacred and secular concerns and for local black communities and mainstream popular culture. As a result gospel became a critical arena in which African Americans contended with questions about the nature of faith, as well as the shape and meaning of racial identity. (3–4)

Jackson begins by exploring debates surrounding black worship forms (chapter 1). From there she analyzes gospel music as a site that afforded black women greater agency (chapter 2); as a source of black cultural capitalism (chapter 3); and as a springboard for big business aspirations (chapter 5). Through a close reading of the career of Sister Rosetta Tharpe (chapter 4), Jackson also exposes the dangers of transgressing a sacred-secular divide perceived to be all too real.

Reed, on the other hand, opts to suspend her training as a music theorist to, as she puts it, “listen to music and write about it” (xii). Rather than engage religious music per se, her aim is to “probe for the holy within the profane,” contending that “black secular music...
conveys the evolving religious consciousness of African Americans in the twentieth century” (12). To this end, the author highlights religious themes as they appear in the lyrics of black popular music. In her chronology, which at times lacks historical precision, Reed engages Pentecostalism as the formative site for black musical aesthetics (chapter 1), explores blues lyrics for religious sensibilities (chapter 2), outlines a tradition of religious parody (chapter 3), and examines the meaning of “crossing over” (chapter 4). Reed also describes what she calls “the black preacher in secular music” (116), an archetype through which she interprets the lives and lyrics of singers such as Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, the lesser known Solomon Burke (chapter 5), and the slain rapper Tupac Shakur.

Both Jackson and Reed identify black Holiness and Pentecostal churches, which they both refer to as the Sanctified Church, as the institutional home of the diverging musical forms to which they attend. According to Jackson, these churches displayed a certain irony. While they celebrated the religious practices most associated with black culture—ecstatic worship, dramatic preaching—they also downplayed race in favor of their religious identity. For Reed, however, it is more important that the worship style of these churches bore witness to a shared African heritage “that persisted in the consciousness of the blacks brought to America” (21). For both authors the tensions formed at the nexus of race and religion in early Pentecostal communities reflected class disputes during the period, which helped to shape a distinct black religious sensibility that has suffused black music, sacred and secular, since.

Understandings of sacred and secular are a point of interest for both authors, and their respective methodological tools provide for a rich excavation of such debates. For Reed, the legacy of Africa is critical here once again, as she repeatedly refers to a “uniquely African-American approach to the sacred/secular dichotomy” (114) that can only be understood in relationship to its origins: a West African worldview that drew no such distinctions. Such an interpretation allows Reed to claim rightfully that there is much in the lyrics of secular music that is religiously significant. Moreover, while recent historiography presents a more complex picture of the cultural worlds from which enslaved Africans were taken, Reed’s analysis brings to light the human agency at work in drawing religious boundaries and their rootedness in specific social contexts. In complementary fashion, Jackson demonstrates the historical contingency of such sacred-secular formulations by attending to the lives of individual gospel artists as they negotiated such boundaries; and Rosetta Tharpe serves as a fascinating case study. The reader is made privy to a myriad of choices—a name change, lyric adjustments, performance dress, multiple audiences—that allowed Tharpe to craft a musical career that leveraged local support from black churches into mainstream acclaim, as evidenced in her performance at Harlem’s Cotton Club and coverage in *Life* magazine. Although Tharpe always attributed her trajectory to faith in God, claiming nightclubs as sites for evangelism, her popularity eventually faded as many churchgoers accused her of religious insincerity.

*Singing in My Soul* and *The Holy Profane* are exceptional resources for exploring the continued salience of black religious music throughout the twentieth century. Read together they critique and complement each other well. Both authors are outsiders to the world of religious and theological studies. As such, neither work is overly burdened with jargon, which is a definite plus; but each would benefit from a parsing out of terminology. For instance, both