

## Black Religion

**By the Same Author**

Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture

# **Black Religion**

**Malcolm X, Julius Lester,  
and Jan Willis**

William David Hart

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BLACK RELIGION

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2008 978-0-230-60537-4

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First published in 2008 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

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ISBN 978-1-349-37284-3 ISBN 978-0-230-61273-0 (eBook)

ISBN 10.1057/9780230612730

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hart, William D., 1957–

Black religion : Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis / by  
William David Hart.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

1. Conversion.
2. African Americans—Religion.
3. Spiritual biography.
4. Christianity and other religions.
5. X, Malcolm, 1925–1965.
6. Lester, Julius.
7. Willis, Janice Dean.
- I. Title.

BL639.H37 2008

200.92'396073—dc22

[B]

2007044336

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: June 2008

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*This book is dedicated to my beloved wife,  
Carrol and to our equally beloved children,  
Adrienne and Kwame. They make life worth living.*

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## P R E F A C E

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For several years, I have taught a course on “African American Religious Autobiography,” the principal readings of which I make the subjects of this book—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), written with Alex Haley; *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew* (1988), by Julius Lester, and *Dreaming Me: From Baptist to Buddhist, One Woman’s Spiritual Journey* (2001), by Jan Willis. In my course, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is the central text, setting the agenda for the others as it does in this book. I chose to write about the autobiographies of Malcolm, Julius, and Jan not because I regard them as representative expressions, respectively, of Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism among black Americans. Whether they are representative, and they may very well be, is an empirical question, the answer to which though interesting is tangential to my inquiry. My inquiry does not depend on representation. It is an *expressive* rather than a *representational* undertaking. I write about these autobiographers because they are interesting and reveal the varieties of black religious expression. I write about them, further, because I teach them, and because of the reactions this material elicits from my students. Invariably, my black students like Malcolm X whom they regard as a cultural hero but regard his religion as deviant. They dislike Julius Lester’s identity politics and regard Judaism as strange and not “black.” They regard Jan Willis as bizarre, asking—“What does Buddhism have to do with black people?” My curiosity about these reactions lies behind this inquiry; especially, the narrow imagination they express, and the peculiarly normative and even “totalitarian” notion of black identity they encode.

Each autobiographer is a singular individual. Malcolm X was a prison-bred autodidact, Julius Lester is a graduate of a historically black college (Fisk University) and a professional writer, and Jan Willis is an Ivy League-educated (Cornell undergraduate, Columbia PhD) professor of Indic and Buddhist Studies at Wesleyan University. Thus,

we have an autobiography written by an accomplished professional writer, on the one extreme and on the other, an autobiography written by a third party, with an autobiography reflecting, perhaps, the reserve of a highly trained academic in between. Other differences seem to track these differences: Julius is the most confessional, Jan the least confessional, and Malcolm the most strategic in what he confesses. Despite these and other differences, each autobiographer is *Afro-Eccentric* and their *Afro-Eccentricity* plays out against the counterpoint of the Black Church. *Afro-Eccentricity* is neither a comprehensive philosophy as Afro- and Africentricity claim to be, nor a principle, that is, a form of cultural essentialism applied to *black people of African descent*. Essentialism is the claim that there is some significant characteristic common to all members of a class that make them who they are. Blood, genetics, spirit, soul, language, and expressive culture have all been proposed as essence-bearers. *Afro-Eccentricity* is a critical pun and trope that mimics, underscores, and reminds us of the difference within the same, the manifold within the apparent uniformity of American black people. As Stuart Hall has argued, there is no essential black subject.<sup>1</sup> Improvisation, the spiritual-blues-Jazz impulse—understood in formal terms as a trope within a trope—is the engine of difference. However, this should not be taken as a backdoor argument for some deep racial/cultural essence that makes black people who they are. The improvisation of which I speak is a pragmatic reaction to contingent historical circumstances. Thus, *Afro-Eccentricity* provides a critique of the essence-bearer view that characterizes Afrocentricity; that view is descriptively wrong, a conceptual prison that is totalitarian in its consequences. The *Afro-Eccentric* interpreter rejects ahistorical notions of essence, notions that deny the trace of the different, nonidentical, and *Afro-Eccentric* other. Against the backdrop of the standard account of black religion, I accent those figures who do not conform to standard expectations of what it means to be a black person *and* a religious person, figures who are eccentric, *Afro-Eccentric*. “*Afro-Eccentric*” is synonymous with “different.” *It refers to ways of “being black” that are off-center, “off-color,” and outside the statistical if not “the” axiological norm.* The standard account of Black Religion often construes *black religious others* (Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists) as strange, deformed, and deviant versions of the black Christian norm. While acknowledging the differences, I contest deviant constructions of *black religious others* by familiarizing religious “deviance” and defamiliarizing the purported “normativity” of the standard account.



My approach to religion is thoroughly naturalistic—that is, religion is a “distal artifact” of evolution by natural selection. Like every other aspect of culture, it emerged because of its survival value for the human species but it persists for reasons that transcend mere survival and may become, like our “sweet tooth,” detrimental to our survival. We dance with the ghosts of our evolutionary history.<sup>2</sup> In this view, gods are *species* of the human imagination and have no reality apart from it. My naturalism, notwithstanding, I inhabit the first-order language of my subjects without questioning every extranatural claim or placing them in quotation marks. I debunk their claims regarding religious institutions, rites, and beliefs only when I need to advance mine. This serves the purpose of avoiding tiresome repetition while reminding the reader of my naturalistic assumptions: that religion is a “distal artifact” of evolution by natural selection, that gods are *species* of the human imagination. I elaborate on my perspective at the end of the book in “Coda: My Point of View as Author.” My naturalism is both methodological and metaphilosophical; thus I reject the convention regarding capitalization and use “god” in lowercase, even when god is a proper name. The only exceptions I make is when quoting, when god begins a sentence, or for emphasis.

I would like thank two people: Jeffrey Stout for reading the manuscript and offering suggestions for restructuring it, and Melvin Peters who tirelessly read many revisions of the manuscript, offered wise council, and behaved admirably as a friend. Whatever virtues this manuscript might have are due largely to him.

### Notes

1. See S. Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in “Black Film, British Cinema,” ed. Kobena Mercer, *ICA Documents* 7 (1988): 27–31.
2. See David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin for Everyone* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2007).

## ABBREVIATIONS

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (AMX)

*Lovesong: Becoming a Jew* (L)

*Dreaming Me: From Baptist to Buddhist, One Woman's  
Spiritual Journey* (DM)