

## Book Review

# Review of *A Qualitative Study of Black Atheists: “Don’t Tell Me You’re One of Those!”*

By Daniel Swann

London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020, 187 pages \$95.

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781498592390/A-Qualitative-Study-of-Black-Atheists>

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The percentage of religiously unaffiliated Americans has grown from just under 7% in the 1980s to over 25% in recent years (Pew 2015). As this demographic grows, so too do the number of social and political organizations being created to cater to the atheists, agnostics, and humanists that make up this diverse group (García and Blankholm 2016). Not surprisingly, there is now a burgeoning interdisciplinary subfield of “nonreligious studies” made up of social scientists who investigate the beliefs, behaviors, and organizations of nonreligious people and the ways that this rise in religious disaffiliation affects social and political life. However, a majority of the research on nonreligious people in the United States focuses on the beliefs and identities of White nonreligious people who are typically recruited from atheist and humanist organizations that cater largely to White, college-educated, middle-class demographics. This lack of attention to the ways that race and class shape nonreligious beliefs and identities has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the lived experiences of nonreligious Americans.

Daniel Swann’s qualitative investigation into the lives of Black atheists is a much-needed intervention into this field and his interview data with 46 Black atheists in the Washington D.C./Baltimore area is full of rich descriptions of the unique and intersectional experiences of Black atheists in the US. Swann joins what are only a handful of academic studies that focus specifically on nonreligious people of color and he contributes one of the first in-depth analyses of Black atheist organizations and the ways that Black atheists are creating their own intellectual spaces in the face of exclusion from the dominant atheist organizations. Swann draws on critical race theory, sociology of religion, queer theory, and social psychology to frame his wide-ranging look into the lived experiences of Black atheists and the ways they navigate what Swann calls the “double-barreled stigma” that comes with being both Black and atheist in America.

The first few chapters focus largely on reviewing relevant literatures on secularization, atheist stigma, and the relationship between race and religion in the United States. For scholars of religion and race, there is not much new here, but Swann provides an accessible overview of how the combination of atheist stigma and high rates of religious adherence in Black communities in the United States makes it difficult for Black Americans to be openly atheist. However, the real contributions of the book come later in the chapters where Swann focuses on the history of Black atheist organizations and his interview data with Black atheists. In chapter 3, Swann provides a “brief” history of Black atheists and skeptics, noting that the chapter is “brief” because so little has been written about Black atheists. Swann argues that the contribution that Black nonreligious people have made to social movements and social progress has been largely erased from our historical narratives and that it has largely been White atheists and Black religious leaders who get remembered instead. In his brief history, he highlights the important work of Black atheists and skeptics throughout history, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston during the Harlem Renaissance, James Forman and Stokely Carmichael during the Civil Rights movement, and Norm R. Allen Jr. who founded African Americans for Humanism in 1989. Swann argues that the relatively recent creation of this first explicitly Black nonreligious organization means that “the identity of Black atheists is still emerging/being codified” (49).

In the final two chapters, Swann begins to flesh out the beliefs and practices that make up these emerging Black atheist identities. Chapter 5 focuses on the intersectional experiences of Black atheists and the ways race and racism shape their atheism. Swann finds that many Black atheists attribute their atheism to their experiences of being Black in America and they “view religion as inextricably linked with slavery and racism” (80). However, the Black atheists in Swann’s study face high levels of stigma as they navigate a society that has a history of excluding both atheists and Black people, as well as a Black community where religion has played an important role in racial justice and where atheism is highly stigmatized. Swann shows how Black atheists are often shunned by their Black friends and family because they are seen as being “unappreciative of Black progress, or unwilling to recognize the centrality of religion to it” (11). Swann provides compelling interview narratives about how Black atheists manage this “double-barreled stigma” in relationships with their family, friends, romantic partners, and coworkers.

Chapter 6 explores how Black atheists think about their place within the larger atheist community. Swann conducts a comparative analysis of the charters and mission statements of predominantly White atheist organizations with statements from Black atheist organizations. He finds that mainstream White atheist organizations typically focus on issues related to church/state separation and largely ignore issues of social justice and racial inequality. As a result, Swann finds that Black atheist organizations are being created to explicitly address this gap and that a separate Black atheist intellectual space is being created as a result. Swann also provides an interesting analysis of how place and geography shape nonreligious identities in a discussion of how the racial and religious make-up of

the Washington D.C. area makes for a unique Black atheist experience. The one area I would have liked to see Swann do more was related to his interviewees' experiences in Black atheist organizations themselves. While he recruited over half of his participants through Black atheist organizations, and talks a lot about these organizations in general, Swann does little to describe his interviewees' participation in these groups or their reasons for joining. This would have added an important piece to the story of Black atheist organizational life.

Swann's rich account of the lived experience of Black atheists is a much-needed addition to the study of secularization and atheism in the United States and it will be of interest to scholars of religion, race, and intersectionality. Swann's accessible writing and concise review of these intersecting literatures would make this a useful addition to undergraduate courses in these topics as well.

## References

- García, Alfredo and Joseph Blankholm. 2016. "The Social Context of Organized Nonbelief: County-Level Predictors of Nonbeliever Organizations in the United States." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55(1):70–90.
- Pew Research Center 2015. "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious". In *Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.