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Michael Broyles

Arizona State University, mabroyle@asu.edu

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Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity

Abstract

This is a book review of *Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity* by Robert Beckford.

Author Notes

Michael A.L. Broyles is a doctoral student in Religious Studies at Arizona State University, where he also teaches. His master's thesis was about preacher and Blues musician Eddie "Son" House. His doctoral research focuses on American author James Baldwin's religious biography and writings about religion.

Theologian and BAFTA-award winning documentary filmmaker Robert Beckford begins *Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity* with a quote from twentieth-century psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary Frantz Fanon: “Each generation out of relative obscurity must discover their mission, fulfil (sic) it or betray it.”¹ Beginning with Fanon’s quote is telling. Beckford’s work is foremost a vibrant call for revolution—revolution of the practice and theology of Black British Pentecostalism, collective memory, Christian aesthetics, and documentary filmmaking. Beckford argues that Pentecostalism, Black Liberation Theology, and incorporated non-Christian African Diaspora religions should be seen as compatible and useful in countering the ongoing legacy of colonialism. Documentary films are one way to aesthetically and thematically incorporate these three strands of thought and practice in order to, evoking Fanon, fulfill said goals. His intended audience consists of Black British Pentecostals, diaspora Jamaicans in England, theologians, White liberal British Christians, filmmakers, and other participants in the arts. Beckford employs methodologies critically appropriated from anthropology, theology, religious studies, and film studies along with the trans-disciplinary methods of ethnography (including autoethnography), hermeneutics, post-colonial theory, and semiotics.

Although Beckford focuses on Britain, his assertions contain a profound connection with and contestation of previous global literature regarding

Pentecostalism. By way of example, I will mention two. In *Kingdom's Come: Religion and Politics in Brazil*, sociologist John Ireland observes that Brazilian Pentecostalism from the late 1960s through the 1980s, in its focus on justice enacted by God, seemingly prohibited mobilization for “any national cause in the arena of formal politics,” including resistance movements.² In his 1976 book-length essay of film criticism, *The Devil Finds Work*, twentieth-century American writer James Baldwin describes his own experience as a teenage preacher in an African American Pentecostal church as akin to participating in a theatrical production designed for recoiling from the terror of the outside world.³ While Ireland and Baldwin’s commentaries on Pentecostalism are more extensive than discussed here, they both represent broader assertions that Pentecostalism has not fostered and does not foster social or political engagement.

In one important way, Beckford agrees with Baldwin and Ireland. He accuses Black British Pentecostals, with which he self-identifies, of focusing too much on prosperity theology, discouraging intellectual discourse, and denying the important ties between faith and social change. Beckford differs, though, in his proposition that Pentecostalism contains the possibility of reversing this tide—a motion that he morally and theologically supports.

Beckford also calls for the incorporation of elements of non-Christian African Diaspora religions—Vodou, Obeah, and others—into Pentecostalism. For one, he argues that Pentecostal exorcism is already a form of conjuring, imbued

with elements of traditional African religions. Pentecostalism's use of the term bewitchment, connected as it is to African Diaspora and European history, becomes a description of the malevolent force of European colonial Christianity. For Beckford, colonial Christianity is an evil that must be ridden through religious and artistic exorcism.

Beckford forms a historical and theological argument for explicitly appropriating two important aspects of Vodou in particular: cannibalism and zombification. He traces the diaspora uses of cannibalism and zombiesm to religious resistance among enslaved people, particularly in Haiti. In this context, cannibalism described the European colonial and slave trading consumption, via ownership and conquer, of African bodies while zombification signified the European desire to control African minds and bodies. Cannibalism in a contemporary British context describes the White consumption of Afro-British, Afro-Caribbean, and English memory. Contemporary zombification signifies his critique of Black Pentecostalism as remaining in a state of anti-intellectualism that reflects the psychological damage of colonialism's legacy. Cannibalism and zombification therefore become poignant manifestations of colonial Christian bewitchment.

Documentary filmmaking, then, emerges as an artistic form of exorcism. Beckford views documentaries as containing the power of “disclosing (the) conjure” of exorcism and religiously “encoding...the emancipatory paradigm.”⁴

That is, the particular themes, symbols, visual compositions, and discourses of documentary films could and should work towards the Christian call for liberation, equality, and social justice against an oppressive colonial legacy.

Beckford astutely illuminates Pentecostalism's historical and continuous embracing of technology. The Black Pentecostal churches were among the first, for example, to adopt the use of the electric organ. Many contemporary churches incorporate up-to-date video and sound technology. Therefore, Pentecostalism's embracing of technology can extend to documentary filmmaking, whereas the technology and technical aspects of film become an extension of the Christian mission.

His own films, presented on Britain's BBC and Channel 4, serve as Beckford's primary examples of encoding liberationist themes. Among them are *Empire Pays Back* (2005) and *Who Wrote the Bible* (2004). *Empire Pays Back* shows Beckford joining with historians and economists to calculate an estimation of compensation owed but never paid to enslaved people after manumission. He notes that slave owners were compensated. In the film, Beckford argues for reparations in the form of funding education centers and events that inform the public of the horrors of the slave trade and the connection between colonial slavery and modern racism. He also calls for the cancellation of debt owed to Britain by former slave colonies. For Beckford, this film performs an exorcism of a cannibalistic collective memory that downplays the brutality and long-term

effects of slavery. He states that his film fulfilled a “prophetic ministry” in its “quest for justice.”⁵

In *Who Wrote the Bible* (2004), Beckford critiques “black Pentecostalism’s limited engagement with academic scholarship” by exploring biblical authorship and canon formation. With Pentecostals as one of his main intended audiences, Beckford encourages them to “think about reading the Bible as a complex text, consisting of numerous genres and authors spanning hundreds of years.”⁶ He says this film attempts to exorcise Black Pentecostalism of the zombie anti-intellectualism promoted historically by slave owners and contemporarily by the legacy of colonial Christianity.

Beckford’s reconciling of Black Liberation Theology and Pentecostalism deserves further investigation from academics in numerous mediums. Beckford names five American religious leaders and academics as models for developing British Black Liberation Theology: James Cone, Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, Al Sharpton, and Jeremiah Wright. None are described as Pentecostal.⁷ Through his American correlations, Beckford seems to argue that Pentecostals should follow the mold of other denominations. But he leaves the following questions unanswered: Is there already an established Pentecostal Liberation movement anywhere? And does he want to set a global trend starting with British Pentecostalism? Given Ireland’s argument that Brazilian Pentecostalism seemingly dissuades congregants from social and

political engagement and Baldwin's portrayal of African American Pentecostalism as a form of escapism, these questions emerge as indelibly important moving forward.

It is refreshing to see a scholar incorporate modes of analysis largely developed in the religious and intellectual discourses of enslaved people. Beckford does so respectfully and creatively. His discussion of non-Christian African Diaspora religious emergence in Christian theology and practice, though, also deserves further attention. In what he calls "responsible syncretism," Beckford insists that these appropriations must be consistent with Christianity, and that the concepts of cannibalism and zombification fit this mold.⁸ This assertion is understandable given Beckford's own religious orientation and intended audience, but I wonder what the reverse looks like. How would his aesthetic and theological argument differ if Christian appropriations needed to be justified through Vodou beliefs? What would a Vodou film perspective look like? In addition, perhaps some practitioners do not propose the need to justify one in terms of the other. Where might they fit?

Beyond its intended audience, *Documentary as Exorcism* contains valuable scholarship for other artists and academics. For filmmakers and those in critical film studies, Beckford serves as an example of incorporating cross-discipline aesthetic and semiotic analysis. He urges documentarians to ensure that their artistic choices align with their moral intent and film scholars to explore

aesthetics, gaze, and semiotics vis-à-vis power relations. After reading Beckford's book, for example, I will forever be asking whether particular films reinforce, contest, or ignore power.

Beckford convincingly speaks to the global aesthetic forces of Pentecostalism and African religions. Pentecostalism is a worldwide phenomenon. The Vodou elements of cannibalism and zombification, mainly through U.S. Voodoo practice, have entered Western films and other art forms in a powerful yet often degrading way. Beckford urges artists and scholars to consider themes prevalent in Pentecostalism and Vodou as relevant to colonial and post-colonial studies—especially vis-à-vis film.

Beckford's discussions of film, power, religion, and semiotics in the end prove highly useful for exploring the legacy of and resistance to colonialism. Pentecostals and theologians in particular must come to terms with his assertion that socio-cultural liberation is a crucial component to Christian redemption and therefore should be central to filmmaking and other artistic endeavors. I also look forward to further incorporation and reconstitution of Vodou forms of analysis and filmmaking from Beckford and others. In these ways, *Documentary as Exorcism* is a worthwhile contribution to the study of religion and film.

¹ This quote is from Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. Beckford 1.

² Rowan Ireland, *Kingdoms Come: Religion and Politics in Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1991) 108.

³ *The Devil Finds Work* was written in 1975 and published in 1976. James Baldwin, *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (Library of America: New York, 1998) 504. Baldwin does not specify that his denomination was Pentecostalism in this essay but this is clarified in literature scholar and friend of Baldwin David Leeming's biography of him. *James Baldwin: A Biography* (Penguin: London, 1994, 1995) 24. These themes are likewise prominent in Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Dell: New York, 1952, 1953, 1980, 1981).

⁴ Beckford 143.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 175, 182.

⁷ To my knowledge, none are Pentecostal, although I have not found any work that names Cornel West's denomination.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

References

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