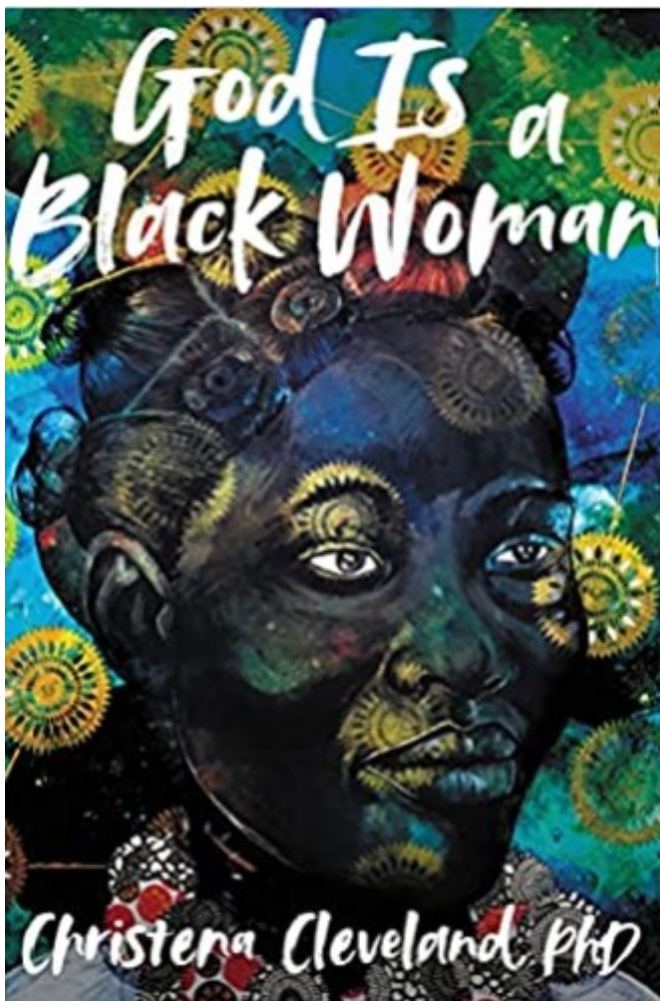


How Christena Cleveland walked away from “whitemalegod”

The social psychologist went on a revolutionary pilgrimage in search of the sacred Black feminine.

by [Denise Rector](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue

In Review



God Is a Black Woman

By Christena Cleveland
HarperOne

[Buy from Bookshop.org >](#)

Over and over again, while kicking around ideas about my dissertation focus, both of my mentors would ask, “What is generative about this?” and “How will this make the field better?” At the time, these questions were frustrating because I didn’t have answers to them. My scholarship explores the feedback loop between historiography and epistemology concerning the construction of African American racial identities throughout US history and in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (of which I am a member).

But now we have Christena Cleveland’s *God Is a Black Woman*. A Black woman looking unflinchingly at “whitemalegod” is a revolution, and it is a revolution Black women act out every day. The social psychologist’s book both names and enacts that revolution.

Cleveland—a social psychologist and the founder and director of the Center for Justice and Renewal and its sister organization, Sacred Folk—uses sociology, theology, Black experience, and common sense to interrogate religion’s stubborn clinging to the fiction of a White, blue-eyed, male Jesus. In doing so, she articulates a faith that not only accounts for but centers her embodiment and experience. This happens against the backdrop of her extraordinary worldwide pilgrimage searching for “the Sacred Black Feminine.”

What happens to your heart rate when you read the words “God is a Black woman”? What about the word *whitemalegod*? Maybe you imagine the same sirens and terror Cleveland felt during the incident she describes in the book’s compelling opening, in which she literally sets off an audible alarm to get closer to a Black Madonna. Cleveland encounters the sacred Black feminine she is seeking, brings it close to us, and also takes us through the self-doubt and racial aggressions in her history as she chooses to transgress. Choosing to transgress, and the liberation it brings along with fear, is a pattern Black women may recognize.

Whitemalegod is Cleveland’s apt neologism for the structure that supports a particular type of White, male, heteronormative patriarchy—one that is churchy, work ethic-based, moralistic, and toxic. This brings to mind Charles Mills’s “epistemology of ignorance”—his term for the way people and institutions agree to misinterpret the world in order to ensure White supremacy. Whitemalegod is not only active in congregations; he floods into many areas of life, even the economic. And frankly, this is where Cleveland’s book gets too real for me. The revolution

becomes a mirror. To my Black woman self, honesty means looking squarely in the eyes of whitemalegod while sitting in the predominantly White institutions that have trained me—the same type of institutions I will be turning to in a few years for employment.

Cleveland's Blackness and her womanness cannot be separated. Not only is this connection vital for personal spirituality, it also influences how she does theology. Intersectionality is important for how you think theologically, no matter your racial or ethnic or gender background. Of course, whitemalegod will wave away those previous sentences with a dismissive "Race is only a construct; we made it up."

Leaving aside the *we*, yes, race is a construct. An extremely powerful one that has ruled what we call the United States since before its inception; a construct that each of us has learned to operate within without even realizing it. This is not a church-versus-world question because the church is not hermetically sealed off from the world. Indeed, that church/world binary is one of many we have inherited without even realizing it, and which we use as a way to sort our reasoning and our moral behavior without even realizing it. I pray you see the pattern.

Along with her intellect and scholarship, Cleveland brings to this book her embodiment and her understanding of the Divine. And with it all, she marches right up to whitemalegod and confronts him on issues of psychology, her family background, and even her speaking platform. She is fully possessed of her desire to connect with the sacred Black feminine and to call out whatever structure impedes her progress.

So, White people, prepare to get your feelings hurt. Cleveland's prose, like Isabel Wilkerson's, does a masterful job of simply relaying the author's experiences to show how Whiteness again and again inserts itself into her search for the sacred Black feminine, how Whiteness reacts to the truths she finds, and how Cleveland moves on—just like Black women academics, pastors, deacons, bishops, managers, clerks, and so on do every single moment of every single day.

I feel like I am supposed to tell White people how to receive this book, because that is what I have learned to expect as a Black academic and a self-confessed "White person whisperer." Get mad. Get mad enough to talk to other White people about what Cleveland says and experiences. Get mad enough to buy a copy for your pastor, your bishop, or your presbyter, with notes in the margins about how

whitemalegod has been sitting in your council or finance meeting for the past 15 years. What else should I say to you all that you do not already know?

To us who have been made in God's image but sold a whitemalegod bill of goods: may we be inspired with the faith to find the sacredness of the image in which we have been made. We have each other and the amazing plurality of God's creation. I'll bring this book along as strength for my journey.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Facing whitemalegod."

[Read Cassidy Hall's interview with Christena Cleveland.](#)