

Religion & The Madhouse featuring Judith Weisenfeld

Show Notes & Major Questions

Overview: On this episode of Religion &, we have invited scholars to engage in a wide-ranging conversation with Judith Weisenfeld on facets of her newest publication *Black Religion in the Madhouse: Race and Psychiatry in Slavery's Wake* (NYU Press, 2025). Join us for a conversation with Dr. Judith Weisenfeld that unpacks Black religious beliefs, new religious movements, and “religious excitement” as a psychiatric concept in institutionalization.

Question 1: Judith, please introduce yourself and how you got into this work. When did you realize black religion was going to be your area of study and what are some moments that have seeded that interest in Black religion?

Judith: I was a religion undergraduate at Barnard College and took classes that interested me. I started in classes like Early Christianity. There was a visitor in the department, Robert Baum, I took a class with him, Religion in Racially Stratified Societies, a comparative class and I was in school during the campus protests to divest from apartheid South Africa.

I was a participant in protests; the protest experience and the classes turned me from early Christianity to African American religious history. It was fundamental. The political moment and the opportunity to take courses that connected to what was going on, helped me understand, learn, and explore.

Texts that were fundamental during this time:

1. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* by Albert J. Raboteau
2. *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* by Arthur Huff Fauset

Question 2: What does it mean to study American religion from the perspective of Black religion?

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination by Toni Morrison

- “Africanism or Blackness is inextricable from the definition of America. In some ways we don’t need the prefix Black to do this work.”

Judith: I think about my work in two buckets, and they overlap in some ways. One, the recovery, what kind of stories are we going to tell about African American histories. The other is more on how has Blackness and Black religion shaped American politics, religion, culture, and so on.

“How did some kind of specter of Black religion feature in early psychiatric theory about race and mental well-being?” a guiding question for Judith’s research

Question 3: What makes Black religion, and Black community so interesting, or worthy of study to the broader culture?

Judith: It is racism, but it is important to understand the return of these figures and how they show up and work in different times and spaces.

Question 4: How have you, Pippa, engaged scholars like Judith's work in your work, how do you see Black religion show up in your work?

Pippa: Judith’s work has been very helpful in exploring early American religion and seeing how the scientific gaze shows up in early reports. I am working on a project on explorers and missionaries and their attempts to scientifically categorize the world they are seeing.

This text has been helpful in seeing how the scientific gaze is emerging to think about both race and religion, and they are inextricable for these explorers. Identity making has also been a large part, it has been so helpful to read this book.

Judith: I got into this research because I pulled a thread from the 1930s and psychiatric studies about Father Divine’s followers and there was something that felt very 19th century to me and I couldn't figure out what it was, so I pulled the thread and this whole thing tumbled out.

Question 5: You are working with very difficult archives, difficult because of access and topic, what has it been like to work with these archives, how do you pull stories from the archives? How did you work with them, how did you find them, what were some challenges you faced with them?

Judith: When I started, I was using the California State Hospital admissions records, which are digitized and on Ancestry.com. It was very spotty; the number of files was great but what was written was often very little, I was often so stuck on that people could spend decades in the hospital and either no one wrote anything or their whole record was discarded.

It was hard, these are hospitals that housed people with a variety of conditions and of all ages. People were forcibly sterilized; people were put to labor. I would prepare myself for what I might find by feeling the textures of the paper.

I felt a responsibility to find ways to write about these people and make them more than just records and medical records. But the kinds of records we have make it really hard.

Question 6: How are these stories, your work, the archives, connected to Black culture or Black communities?

Judith: I start the book with a series of unusual events; I wanted to show how medical discourse was not all that different from popular culture discourse. The hospitals, for the most part, are a great development and sometimes they are not good. By looking into these people's stories, sometimes we can see a more complex relationship between the hospitals and people than I had imagined I would find.

There is also something about disciplining Black religion in the hospitals which shows up with the clergy there. So, a very complicated landscape of engagement with these institutions.

Joseph: I love how in the text you talk about how it is not only about a particular argument about Black religion or excitement but also about a fitness for civic participation. About how different regimes either enable or disable folks from participating.

Question 7: How do you differentiate between bio-political regimes or these control mechanisms that we're seeing and authentic interest in scientific advancement?

Judith: I am honestly, not sure how to answer that. I did try to understand the motivations besides just the medical, which was very important to my research. The science of the time is in service of a certain kind of ideas, around containment, freedom, and health.

Pippa: I think we can see authentic interest in periods before the professionalization of medicine, if you can get back to midwives and healers. I think of John Wesley, who was a founder of the Methodists, and was so upset with where we saw medicine going, towards profit and away from helping people.

"I work with healthcare students, and they genuinely want to help people, but how they are able to help within these powerful structures can be very challenging." - Pippa

Question 8: Judith, as you have been finishing this text, what is something that you are still thinking about, or want to return to?

Judith: There is so much but, secular versus religious.

Pippa: Judith explains very clearly that the story of religion and the development of psychiatry is not a case of religion versus secular authority but that psychiatry, which is supposed to be this secular authority is acutely shaped by white Protestant norms of rationality and civilization. **How do you develop this point, did you know you wanted to make this argument, or did it simply come up during research?**

"The secular acts as a mask for the religious." - Terence Keel

Judith: Terence was one of the voices that pushed me to pursue this project, to really dive into secularism as a kind of mask, how Christian though is fused with scientific thinking about race. I had read a lot about these doctors and hospitals, I wondered who these people were and found how many of the early doctors had come from slave owning families, owned slaves themselves, so it seemed to me that this shed a light on their arguments about slavery and Black people. Religion also was a large part of their lives; they were not secular.

Question 8: What things from the archives did you not use? Were there things in the archive that did not relate to this project, but you might return to? And where does this lead you, where does it point you in the future?

Judith: I end the book with this guy George Bennet; he has a huge archive at the Schaumburg that I only scratched the surface of. He is an interesting figure who wrote a lot and has a message to deliver. The afterlives are something I would want to return to.

Questions from Audience

1. In the 1800s, both African Americans and women in the US were gaining public and institutional roles in organized religion for the first time. Wasn't medical interest in religious excitement an effort to control and quash their public influence? Were any leaders or movements stopped by the diagnosis of insanity?
2. Did you find any drawings/sketches/artwork by patients in any of the archives you examined? If so, how did that affect (or not) your investigations?