

Book Review

***bell hooks' Spiritual Vision: Buddhist, Christian, and Feminist.* By Nadra Nittle. Fortress Press, 2023. 147 pages. \$24.00 (paperback). ISBN 9781506488363**



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In the opening chapter of *bell hooks' Spiritual Vision*, author Nadra Nittle reveals her motivation for writing this book. Since her untimely death in December 2021, obituaries and tributes have noted hooks' status as a feminist thinker and cultural critic but shared little about the spiritual philosophy that grounded her life. According to Nittle, hooks arrived at a space in which her spiritual practice and activism were intertwined. Nittle explores this deep interconnection in this slim volume.

In Chapter 1, "The Buddhist-Christian Love Ethic of bell hooks," Nittle paints hooks as a woman of faith who believed in the transformative power of love. She cites two foundational teachers in hooks' spiritual vision: Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and pastor and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Both men centered their life and teaching around a courageous loving-kindness that can bring peace amid violence. She came to understand herself as a Buddhist-Christian. At the same time, from her perspective as a feminist, she critiqued organized religion, especially Christianity, which she observed could be both patriarchal and capitalist.

The next two chapters, "The Girl with Too Much Spirit" and "Christianity for the Outcast," give a kind of spiritual autobiography of hooks, noting the people and ideas that influenced her in her early life through young adulthood. hooks described a childhood in which her parent actively crushed her self-expression with physical, verbal, and emotional abuse. This experience led her to champion children's right and develop a form of children's liberation theology that proclaims that children are made in the image of God and have the same value as adults. Nittle gives examples of enlightened witnesses within and outside the church that valued the "god voice" within Gloria (hooks' birth name). In particular, she highlights Gloria's grandmother, Saru, who asserted that "believing in God has nothing to do with going to church" (45). Saru practiced Christianity alongside traditional African spiritual beliefs, paving the way for Gloria to create her own Buddhist-Christian hybrid belief system.

Chapter 4 (“A Feminist Approach to Spirituality”) and Chapter 5 (“Faith without Capitalism and Fundamentalism”) detail hooks’ unique combination of feminism, spirituality, and cultural critique. hooks saw no contradiction in being a feminist of faith. She asserted that “feminism has been and continues to be a resistance movement that valorizes spiritual practice” (55). She sought the divine feminine in both Buddhism and Christianity and connected religion and politics, which sprang from her experience of the Black church during the civil rights movement. hooks recognized that simply installing women in power, without dismantling the domination systems inherent in capitalism, perpetuated a “benevolent patriarchal imperialism” (74). She also argued that fundamentalist Christianity (even in the Black church) was often an agent of colonization, racism, and sexism. She yearned for a church with a progressive nonsexist vision.

The focus on the final two chapters, “Love is Everything” (Chapter 6) and “New Visions of Romance and Relationships” (Chapter 7), is her 2001 book *All About Love*. For hooks, love is a spiritual practice opposed to imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy and can be defined as “the will to nurture our own or another’s spiritual growth” (96). She critiqued the notion of “falling in love,” instead seeing love as a lasting spiritual force rather than a feeling. In this way she believed that friendship can be an important source of love. She found that patriarchy had conditioned men to desire control rather than mutuality in relationship, but also asserted that “patriarchy has no gender” (111) and women often perpetuate systems of domination.

In the afterword, Nittle give a poignant account of hooks’ final days, relating the spiritual practices she engaged in as she was dying. In her final tribute to hooks, Nittle quotes *All About Love*, where hooks writes, “Sometimes we invoke the dead by allowing wisdom they shared to guide our present action” (127). In this way, hooks’ words live on in the seeds she has planted in others.

For anyone who has followed bell hooks’ work, this book will be a welcome insight into her spiritual vision. Especially interesting is how Nittle traces hooks’ spiritual roots, detailing the people and ideas that shaped her multireligious belonging. Nittle’s writing style mirrors that of hooks—straightforward, clear, free of jargon, yet expressing profound ideas. This book, therefore, is accessible to the non-academic reader while sufficiently researched and cited to be used in academic circles.

There is little to critique in the content of the book but there is something missing. Anyone who has read hooks’ volumes on teaching might wonder why there is no section on how hooks encounters and fosters spirituality in the classroom. She writes eloquently about these ideas in multiple works. One powerful example is in her 2003 book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* where she envisions creating a classroom that is “a place where our spirits can be renewed and our souls restored...a place where the spirit matters, where all that we learn and know leads us into greater connection.”¹ Nittle clearly shows how hooks’ spiritual practice was connected to her activism; she does not, however, demonstrate how her spiritual vision was central to her professional practice as an educator. Perhaps this is another book entirely; such a work would certainly add to the exploration of hooks’ legacy.

¹ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 183.

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