

***Dancing in My Dreams: A Spiritual Biography of Tina Turner.* By Ralph H. Craig III. Eerdmans, 2023. 291 pages. \$26.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9780802878632.**

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In *Dancing in My Dreams: A Spiritual Biography of Tina Turner*, Ralph H. Craig III tells the story of Tina Turner's life as a tale of two dreams. The first is well known to the general public: achieving commercial success—as she put it, “[to] fill a football stadium” (p. 165). The second is to be a religious teacher, and it is this dream that Craig identifies as the main throughline of Turner's life. Craig's thesis is that “Turner's story is fundamentally a religious one” (p. 6), and his stellar book takes care in crafting a compelling narrative of Turner's life in terms of religion and spirituality. Published within Eerdmans's Library of Religious Biography series, this book will be an exciting and insightful read for fans of Tina Turner because of Craig's focus on Turner's spirituality and religiosity in telling her story, which amounts to an intervention in previous accounts of Turner's life that have not paid sufficient attention to this aspect of her life.

Beyond fans of Tina Turner, those interested in American religion, Buddhism in America, or Black Buddhism will find Craig's book a valuable contribution to scholarship for the way he parses Tina Turner's religious identity. After quoting Turner on *Larry King Live* in 1997, where Turner tells Larry King that she converted to Buddhism, Craig poses the question: “What does conversion mean for Turner?” (p. 7). Put another way, what did it mean for her to identify as “Buddhist-Baptist” (p. xi), as she once said in a 1993 *Vanity Fair* interview? Craig's book can be understood as an answer to these questions. He posits that understanding Turner's “identity as a Buddhist requires a more expansive conception of conversion” (p. 8), one that has space for Turner's Afro-Protestant and American metaphysical backgrounds. Equipped with this more capacious understanding of conversion and a full arsenal of materials, including Turner's memoirs, interviews, live recordings, and song lyrics, as well as the perspectives of those who crossed paths with her, Craig manages to disentangle “the intertwined threads” (p. 5) of Turner's combinatory religious life. In doing so, he not only convincingly argues for understanding Turner's life in religious terms but also

elevates Turner to the status of a Black Buddhist teacher of considerable note.

The first chapter, “Motherless Child,” begins with Turner’s upbringing in Tennessee as Anna Mae Bullock. Craig provides initial context to her hometown of Nutbush and Black Southern religious culture, including the role of nature in Turner’s early life, before going into the personal and religious background of each side of Turner’s family. He pays particular attention to her maternal and paternal grandmothers, whom he identifies as critical figures in Turner’s early religious upbringing, linking their influence to the womanist theologian Yolanda Pierce’s notion of “grandmother theology.” Turner’s paternal grandmother took her to the Woodlawn Missionary Baptist Church, introducing her not only to a religious space but also to a formative environment for the young Anna Mae, notably the discipline of prayer. Craig also includes a discussion of Turner’s brief time in a Pentecostal church during her parents’ stint in Knoxville, where Turner was introduced to alternative “performative possibilities” to the Baptist church experience: “ecstatic worship,” including the “holy dance” (p. 46). These early seeds of nature, prayer, and ecstatic worship are drawn out later in the book, as Craig connects them to Turner’s American metaphysical religion, the chanting of her Buddhist practice, and her concerts as religious experiences.

The second chapter, “Becoming ‘Tina Turner,’” follows Turner’s move to St. Louis in 1956 upon the death of her maternal grandmother. It was in St. Louis that she would meet Ike Turner and eventually join him to form the Ike and Tina Turner Revue. This chapter and the preceding both pay close attention to the connections between music and religion for Turner. Growing up, she heard and sang gospel in church at Woodlawn and heard blues, swing, and country on the radio. As an artist and performer, Turner united her musical influences with her religious background. Craig aptly shows this with Turner’s delivery of “Proud Mary,” which ends in a “frenzied climax” (p. 65), demonstrating Turner’s Afro-Protestant upbringing. Fans of music and religion will find Craig’s lyrical analysis and his explanation of Turner’s influences richly insightful. Additionally, the second chapter introduces the beginnings of Turner’s spiritual awakening, primarily through psychics she consulted while touring (one of whom gave her a reading about leaving Ike Turner, which Turner would hold onto closely), as well as how Turner and her band responded to racism and the social activism

of the times. This chapter illustrates how American metaphysical religion bridged Turner's Afro-Protestant upbringing with her later encounter with and conversion to Buddhism.

The seeds of Turner's conversion to Buddhism are planted in the third chapter, "Tina's Prayer," amidst the twilight years of her relationship with Ike Turner. Craig documents two encounters with Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism in Turner's life before her third encounter, which led to her subsequent incorporation into her life of chanting, a major component of Nichiren Buddhism. At this point, her conversion is not a surprise to the reader, for Craig has laid the groundwork of Turner as a "spiritual seeker" of the American metaphysical tradition; further, her gravitation to chanting comes off as natural, given the role of prayer in Turner's religious formation in the Baptist church as well as her predilection for music. Indeed, Turner said later in a 2011 *Lion's Roar* interview that "*Nam-myoho renge-kyo* is a song" (p. 196). Craig's knowledge of Nichiren Buddhism shines in this chapter and throughout the rest of the book, providing context for how Turner would have encountered Soka Gakkai International (SGI) while living in Los Angeles and insight into how SGI's principles appealed to Turner.

The fourth chapter, "Becoming Tina," is the book's power chapter, as it explains Turner's conversion to Buddhism and thus serves as the culmination of the previous chapters and a springboard for the two final chapters, which see Turner fulfill both of her wildest dreams. Whereas the third chapter introduces Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism in Turner's life before she left Ike, the fourth chapter demonstrates how her newfound practice sustained her during her career reboot. Indeed, it is as a Buddhist *practitioner* that Craig lands in making sense of Turner's conversion to Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism. Craig cites Peter Gregory's 2001 article, "Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America," and his terminology of "practitioner" (p. 105) to best make sense of Turner's fundamental reliance on Nichiren Buddhism while also including non-Buddhist practices. For example, take the concept of "karma" in Nichiren Buddhism.

Turner continued to consult a psychic “soul reader,” Carol Dryer, who “explained to [Turner] what exact karma carried across her lifetimes to place her in the situation she now found herself in with Ike Turner” (p. 113). Craig attributes therapeutic value to this explanation of karma for Turner and how she made sense of the trauma of her lifetime. With the launching of her solo career, the role of Turner’s newfound practice in her life is clear, as her interviews at the time centered on her Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism.

A controversial episode occurs during Turner’s solo launch, and Craig does not shy away from it as an opportunity to illustrate the relationship between Turner’s newfound Buddhist identity and professional life: In 1980, to pay off debts related to her signing with new management, Turner went on a multi-week tour of apartheid South Africa. Craig notes that Turner herself had lived through apartheid, the Jim Crow South. After a member of her group was denied service at a restaurant for being Black, Turner responded by saying that the racism experienced by Blacks in South Africa “is their karma” and that “they were brought back to live their lives this way” (p. 131). Craig notes that while this notion of karma as “social force” is unique among the works of other Black Buddhists, Turner also suggests in her response that she understood karma “on the level of transformation” to be “primarily personal” (p. 133), an understanding which would later come to the fore in her teaching of karma in her memoir-cum-self-help-book, *Happiness Becomes You*. In referring to this episode in Turner’s life, Craig offers a capacious reading of Turner, much like his reading of conversion, which allows space for personal transformation in her life.

The big payoff of Craig’s carefully crafted account of Turner’s life up to her breakout as a solo artist occurs in the final two chapters in which the reader sees Turner realize each of her dreams. The fifth chapter, “Wildest Dreams,” covers the arc of Turner’s solo commercial career. Craig contends in this chapter that Turner understood her concerts as religious experiences, and by showing how her preparation for her shows connected

to her stage performance and message, Craig links Turner's artistry to her religious identity and practice. Craig refers to this as Turner's "wildest dreams rock aesthetic" (p. 144). As a "musical bodhisattva" (p. 149), "Turner's spiritual preparation framed her concerts and enabled her to see them as an expression of her Buddhist practice in line with Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhist teachings" and, thus, "Turner becomes a live embodiment of the wildest-dreams message" (p. 180). Craig takes Turner's concert experience to be within "the revivalist mode of religious experience in American religious history" (p. 181), and at this point in the book, it comes as no surprise that the second of Turner's two wildest dreams was to become a religious teacher, the subject of the sixth and concluding chapter.

With her record-setting concerts and album sales, millions all over the world were familiar with her voice. Yet, she had a dream beyond merely being heard by the masses: She wanted to be listened to as a religious teacher. The final chapter of *Dancing in My Dreams*, "Beyond and Beyond," sees Turner realize this second of her two wildest dreams. Craig follows this role for Turner in the latter part of her life with the recording of the *Beyond* albums and the publication of her 2023 book *Happiness Becomes You*. The four *Beyond* albums were recorded with musician Regular Curti and singer Dechen Shak-Dagsay and included both Christian and Buddhist prayers and teachings, indicative of Turner's persistent combinatory religious approach. Craig tracks Turner's Buddhist message across these albums, which included basic discussion of Buddhist metaphysics, chanting, and singing. In *Happiness Becomes You*, Turner explains her concept of "changing poison into medicine" and her theory of the ten worlds in Nichiren Buddhism, which she frames through Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Craig takes this correspondence between supernatural and psychological worlds in terms of "Buddhist modernist discourse" (p. 209). With her memoir to introduce her Buddhist teachings, Craig places Turner among other Black Buddhist teachers and views it as an expression of her "combinatory religiosity" (p. 214). One point that is not addressed explicitly is the role of Turner's SGI

affiliation in her desire to become a religious teacher (or vice-versa). After all, each member is trained to be a “lay religious teacher” (p. 81). Did Turner’s dream to teach precede her joining SGI such that it primed her to join and anticipated her seeking out this role later in life, or did being a member of SGI influence Turner’s second dream? Being able to pose such questions is a testament to the success of Craig’s overall argument about the centrality of religion in Turner’s life and the emphasis she placed on using her life to deliver a religious message of inner liberation from one’s circumstances.

Taken together, the chapters of Craig’s book support his argument that understanding Tina Turner’s life requires a focus on the role of religion and spirituality in it. The early chapters set a foundation for tracking the influences of Turner’s combinatory religious approach through her early career with Ike Turner, her solo career, and beyond into her retirement from the spotlight, but not from a captive audience. It is impossible, after reading *Dancing in My Dreams*, not to see how Turner’s musicality and performance are linked to her religiosity. It is also impossible not to appreciate the work Craig has put into telling Turner’s story as a tale of two wildest dreams. In particular, his deep context of Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism and close reading of Turner’s words, both spoken and lyrical, aid in convincing the reader that Turner’s religiosity should be center stage in the telling of her life’s story and also that Turner should be added to the litany of Black Buddhist teachers in America. Craig’s understanding of Turner’s life in terms of her religiosity feels necessary and *Dancing in My Dreams* comes as a timely intervention, but Craig’s book is so much more than just this correction. The book itself is a lesson in listening and offers a new perspective on the life of Turner from which all readers stand to benefit.