Book Review

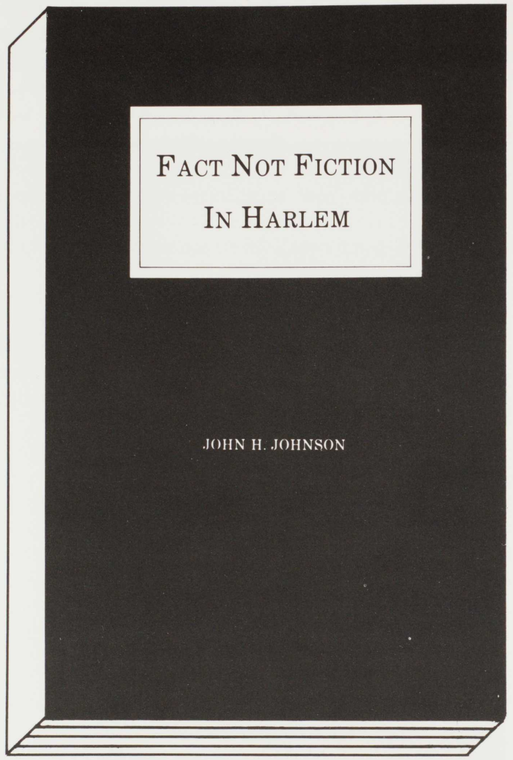
INVITATION TO LEARNING:
FACT NOT FICTION IN HARLEM
By John H. Johnson, 119 pages,
NORTHERN TYPE PRINTING, INC.,
GLEN COVE, NEW YORK, 1980...$5.00

—By David N. Licorish, Editor and Publisher,
The Baptist—A Monthly Magazine, Inc.

The Reverend Dr. John Howard Johnson, Founder and Retired Rector of St. Martin's Church in New York City, takes us on a journey through Harlem in an invitation to learning about Harlem. He reviews the amazing record of achievement of his ministry in serving to break down barriers and to build bridges toward better human relationships not only at home but also abroad. He links the Old and the New Worlds together by the introduction of art, artifacts, architecture, music, and mosaics. He packs a few necessary punches against segregation, discrimination and racism, dealing some telling blows against the body politic as he does so.

To those growing up in the ghetto of Harlem during the thirties, such books as *Home to Harlem* and *Metropolis* by Claude MacKay, *The Walls of Jericho* by Rudolph Fisher, *Black No More* by George Schuyler, *Color and Copper Sun* by Countee Cullen, became must reading about Harlem. However, none of these books have told the complete story of the plight, the courage, the desires, the sacrifices, the disciplines, the dedication and the determination of a people's faith, as the book, *Invitation to Learning; Fact Not Fiction in Harlem,* by Dr. John Howard Johnson tells it. The book is not merely a story of the transference of property during the exodus of white Protestant Churches and synagogues from Harlem when large numbers of Blacks sought new areas of expansion nor is it merely the story of the great transitional period of change of community occupancy. It is, instead, the story of a divine transformation.

Here we have an open invitation to learn about the spirit of the people of Harlem. Dr. Johnson escorts us from the midsection of Manhattan, the Sixties, which was known as "San Juan Hill" and even bore such an infamous name as "The Jungle" to Harlem, beginning with the Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, at one time located at 122nd Street and Lenox Avenue. The congregation of Holy Trinity had made its exodus in 1921 after a disastrous fire had left the burnt-out edifice with nothing but the walls of the church standing. This site was destined to become the St. Martin's church, through the aegis of Bishop Manning and Holy Trinity Church.



As a Vicar Father Johnson readily became the people's priest by reaching out far beyond the limited borders of sectarianism through providing jobs for the people of Harlem who flocked to the church to lend him their support. From the start, St. Martin's became an ecumenical center. Dr. Johnson dropped the word "Episcopal" from his title long before the synod of New York gave the subject any consideration. I heard him say, "I want this church to be known as St. Martin's Church." As a humble, humane Parish Priest he has not lifted his voice on highways or byways; he has not taken to the sidewalks as a Soap-Box Orator or a Step Ladder Bravado, but rather in his quiet and deliberate fashion he has wielded his influence by striking down the strongholds of segregation in a racist society. He delights in pulling down pious pageantry of people in high places by demanding from them a compassionate attitude in their dealings with those who are caught in the web of malcontent.

Fact Not Fiction in Harlem deals with the great strengths of Black people, their heritage and contributions to the ongoing stability of institutionalized religion. It depicts for the period from 1928 to 1981 the culture and cosmopolitan spirit of the people of Harlem. It portrays accurately a vast field—

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architectural gems, exquisite art forms, Mosaic masterpieces, music mania and Masters (carillons), persons of prominence, but, together with these, he mentions insignificant persons who are brought to the fore and lauded for what they have done for the glory of God through their proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Though Dr. Johnson is the Father of the White Collar Work Integration in Harlem through his opening up the Bloomstein's Store to Black White Collar Workers, yet, he blows no trumpet in bloating epithets or boasting braggadocio in making his pronouncements. Instead, he quietly employs his subtle sense of humor to get the last laugh.

This book is like a good glass of wine on a cold wintry day. It comes to us at a period of decadence in the life of Harlem, when deterioration is much more visible than rehabilitation for it depicts the courage of the children of God from all races, creeds and cultures in bringing into fruition the glorious Kingdom of God. It actually succeeds in presenting permanence in a period of impermanence as the battle for survival goes, as it does, on between good and evil. Dr. Johnson refuses to let the Episcopal Church remain static and snobbish, magnifying its tradition at the expense of storefront churches and other ecumenical groupings, pampering themselves by their pretentious piety, and adorned with the precious garments of ecclesiastical distinctions. St. Martin's is not only everybody's church; it has the distinction of caring for everybody.

The book holds your interest from start to finish. When once you have begun to read it, it becomes difficult to turn aside to anything else. Students will not only have an arresting and brilliant story of Harlem, but there can be no full story of Harlem without Dr. Johnson's *Fact Not Fiction in Harlem.* Here is a text-book of value for seminars, for Pastoral Theology, for Community Cultures, for Art in Religion, a book of ecumenical adventures and achievements.

Dr. Johnson has mastered the art of storytelling. His description of scenes is so graphic that you feel at once as though you are standing on the soil of Florence, or in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. He then takes you to Holland to listen to the Bells of St. Martin's or back to the United States to Greenwood, South Carolina, or to England in St. Martin's in the Fields or to Canterbury, the oldest Cathedral Church of England, or just walking to St. Martin's on Lenox Avenue at 122nd Street, in Harlem. He also takes you to Rome, to Venice, to Milan and to Florence, the art center of the world. He takes you also to the ancient art forms, and the architectural gems that slumber in the silent dust of the ages come alive as a contemporary challenge to the deterioration and decadence that threaten to erase and remove Harlem from its unique place and role in American history. Art of the ancient past is salvaged for us from the ruins of a repository of abandoned churches and through faith, hope is rediscovered, reclaimed and rededicated to the public worship of God.

Fact Not Fiction in Harlem shows you the survival of the Church and its ministry as a miracle of Faith. A miracle of modern times is this bringing together of peoples in a parish from various walks of life, from many Caribbean islands, the recovery, rehabilitation and rededication of imposing architectural and structural elegance and the transplanting of European cultures visible in art forms, mosaics, and carillon music under one roof is indeed a miracle of modern times. The bells of Holland ringing out the Songs of Zion in celebration of triumph, in solace to the sorrowful, in thanksgiving, "Let Us Praise Him!"; or "Faith of Our Fathers Living Still," or "Fight the Good Fight with all Thy Might," or "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," or "O, God, our Help in Ages Past" lift us out of the narrow confines of the Episcopal parish to the broad cosmopolitan community of ecumenism. Talk about a melting pot. Where else would you find it but in the ecumenical thrust of the Black Churches that have characterized their role in their bid for full freedom, for recognition, for identification, involvement, honor in adventures and achievements through the pragmatism of the Christian Ideal in the pursuit of happiness in the struggle of life?

By identifying parishioners with art forms, they become an integral part of the total Church. Though Dr. Johnson in his book deals with a number of prominent persons who have influenced his ministry, such as his father, Dr. John Wesley Johnson, Rector of the St. Cyprian Church, Dr. Harry Peirce Nichols, Rector of the Holy Trinity Church from 1899 to 1922, Dr. Hughell W.E. Manning, Bishop of New York, and Franz Boas, Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, yet his presentation is without partiality or race prejudice when he gives credit to the Episcopal Churches in Harlem.

Fact Not Fiction in Harlem may be summarized under four B's: Bells, Boycotts, Baseball, and Bumpy Johnson. Bells: Carillon music for the Community; Boycotts: Breaking down barriers and building bridges to integrate Black White Collar Workers in Harlem Stores, Baseball to Integrate Sports; and Bumpy Johnson to show compassion at a time of Judgment. Here Dr. Johnson's priesthood is at its highest pinnacle in its pursuit of understanding.