

local

**Requested For : DONALDSON, BRIANNE G
(Donaldson, Brianne G)**

Resource Request Slip Letter

09/20/2021

Request Type: Patron digitization request



Request ID: 21121862390004701

**African American religious thought : an anthology /
By: West, Cornel**

ISBN: 0664224598 (alk. paper)

Edition: 1st ed

Imprint: Louisville, Ky. : Westminster John Knox Press, [2003], ©2003

Location: Langson Library

**Call
Number:
BR563.N4
A364 2003**

Destination: Langson Library Circulation

Request Note: Cornell West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., eds., "Introduction: Towards New Visions and New Approaches in African American Religious Studies," in African American Religious Thought: An Anthology (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), pp. xi-xxvi.

Langson Library

Scanjob 7850

RH

NOTICE - Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions.

The copyright law of the United States (**Title 17, United States Code**) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of Copyright Law.

African American
Religious Thought

An Anthology

Cornel West
Eddie S. Glaude Jr.

Editors

Westminster John Knox Press
LOUISVILLE • LONDON

LL

BR

563

.N4

A364

2003

© 2003 Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Westminster John Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396.

Book design by Sharon Adams
Cover design by Eric Handel/LMNOP

First edition
Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

Permissions acknowledgments are on pages 1051–1054 and constitute a continuation of this copyright page.

This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standards Institute Z39.48 standard. ☺

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12 — 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

African American religious thought : an anthology / Cornel West, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., editors.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-664-22459-8 (alk. paper)

1. African Americans—Religion. I. West, Cornel. II. Glaude, Eddie S., 1968–

BR563.N4A364 2004

230'.089'96073—dc21

2003053468

Contents

Introduction: Towards New Visions and New Approaches in African American Religious Studies	xi
<i>Cornel West</i>	
<i>Eddie S. Glaude Jr.</i>	
Part 1. Prehistory of African American Religious Studies	
1. Of the Faith of the Fathers	3
<i>W.E.B. Du Bois</i>	
2. Origins of the Church	14
<i>Benjamin Elijah Mays and Joseph William Nicholson</i>	
3. The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death	29
Love	49
<i>Howard Thurman</i>	
4. The Negro Church and Assimilation	62
<i>E. Franklin Frazier</i>	
Part 2. Theorizing African American Religion	
5. American Africans in Conflict: Alienation in an Insecure Culture	77
<i>Cornel West</i>	
6. Authority, Alienation, and Social Death	99
<i>Orlando Patterson</i>	
7. The Racial Factor in the Shaping of Religion in America	156
<i>C. Eric Lincoln</i>	

8.	The Black Church: A Gender Perspective <i>Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham</i>	187
9.	The Central Themes of American Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White <i>David W. Wills</i>	209
10.	Assessment and New Departures for a Study of Black Religion in the United States of America <i>Charles H. Long</i>	221
Part 3. Slavery and a Black Religious Imagination		
11.	Death of the Gods <i>Albert J. Raboteau</i>	239
12.	The Christian Tradition Black Conversion and White Sensibility Religious Foundations of the Black Nation <i>Eugene Genovese</i>	285 291 301
13.	Exodus <i>Theophus H. Smith</i>	309
14.	Of the Black Church and the Making of a Black Public <i>Eddie S. Glaude Jr.</i>	338
15.	“Doers of the Word”: Theorizing African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the Antebellum North <i>Carla L. Peterson</i>	366
Part 4. Black Destiny and the End of the Nineteenth Century		
16.	“Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Forth Her Hands”: Black Destiny in Nineteenth-Century America <i>Albert J. Raboteau</i>	397
17.	The Making of a Church with the Soul of a Nation, 1880–1889 <i>James Melvin Washington</i>	414
18.	Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom <i>Elsa Barkley Brown</i>	435

**Part 5. The Interwar Period: Migration, Urbanization,
and Black Religious Diversity**

19. Racial Christianity 477
S. P. Fullinwider
20. Religious Diversification during the Era
of Advanced Industrial Capitalism 495
Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer
21. Chosen Peoples of the Metropolis: Black Muslims,
Black Jews, and Others 534
Wilson Jeremiah Moses
22. Religious Ethos of the UNIA 550
Randall K. Burkett
23. Marcus Garvey, Father Divine, and the Gender Politics
of Race Difference and Race Neutrality 572
Beryl Satter
24. Charles Manuel "Sweet Daddy" Grace 605
John O. Hodges
25. The Black Roots of Pentecostalism 616
Iain MacRobert
26. "Together and in Harness": Women's Traditions
in the Sanctified Church 629
Cheryl Townsend Gilkes
27. Reverend George Washington Woodbey:
Early Twentieth-Century California Black Socialist 651
Philip S. Foner

Part 6. Black Religion and the 1960s

28. From *The Luminous Darkness* 679
Howard Thurman
29. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the African-American
Social Gospel 696
Clayborne Carson
30. The Religion of Black Power 715
Vincent Harding
31. Integrationism and Nationalism in
African-American Intellectual History 746
James H. Cone

Part 7. Black Theology and Its Critics

32. A Sense of Urgency
Albert B. Cleage Jr. 765
33. Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation
James H. Cone 775
34. Slave Theology in the "Invisible Institution"
Dwight N. Hopkins 790
35. Black Theology and the Black Woman
Jacquelyn Grant 831
36. Divine Racism: The Unacknowledged Threshold
Issue for Black Theology
James Cone: God, Champion of the Oppressed
William R. Jones 849
854
37. Black Theology and Marxist Thought
Cornel West 874
38. Ontological Blackness in Theology
Victor Anderson 893

Part 8. African American Religion and Cultural Criticism

39. Jesse Jackson and the Symbolic Politics
of Black Christendom
James Melvin Washington 921
40. The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited: Vodou
and Haitian Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism
Elizabeth McAlister 942
41. Rethinking Vernacular Culture: Black Religion
and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s
Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham 978
42. Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Black Church
and Community
Kelly Brown Douglas 996
43. For Rent, "Cabin in the Sky": Race, Religion,
and Representational Quagmires in American Film
Judith Weisenfeld 1019
44. The Prophetic Tradition in Afro-America
Cornel West 1037
- Permissions Acknowledgments 1051

Introduction

Towards New Visions and New Approaches in African American Religious Studies

Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr.

African American religious studies has reached a crossroads. Such a moment was inevitable. As the field continues to grow and as scholars continue to produce a range of work on the subject, new theoretical and methodological questions are bound to arise. What then is this crossroads? In some ways, the field struggles to emerge from a certain set of theological reflections that have dominated it since its inception. To be sure, the works of James Cone and others brought the preoccupations of more traditional scholarship in the field into a new milieu in which new sorts of questions could be asked and black religious experiences could be examined differently. Cone's efforts to translate (with the skill of a brilliant systematic theologian) the insights of the prophetic black church tradition into an idiom of Black Power resulted in the formation of a new discourse—one that contained a number of different trajectories as to how African American religious studies could be configured and as to how black ministers might substantively intervene and minimize the suffering in black communities.

One notices these concerns in Gayraud Wilmore's definition of African American religious studies. He writes:

African American Religious Studies refers to the investigation, analysis and ordering of a wide variety of data related to the religions of persons of African descent for the purpose of authenticating and enriching personal faith and preparing clergy and laity for the ministry in the Black Church and community, understood in terms of competent and faithful leadership in worship, education,

and corporate action in behalf of God's mission of liberation for all people.¹

This definition reflects Wilmore's effort (1) to resist narrow functionalist accounts of black religion, which fail to take seriously the way black individuals think about God, and (2) to insist on the practical relevance of the field in efforts to fight against various forms of oppression. For Wilmore, the sorts of distinctions that make possible the dispassionate treatment of religion as "an object of inquiry" simply do not hold for African American religion. As he writes, "the best religious scholarship in the black academy is, perforce, 'believing scholarship,' accepting all the risks that such a position entails."² The realities of white supremacy and the role of black religion in resisting those realities make it difficult, in his view, to engage in "armchair theorizing" about African American religious practices. As such, the training of pastors becomes a critical component shaping courses of African American religious studies. So, for Wilmore, despite his commitment to interdisciplinary approaches to the subject matter, theological commitments and practical relevance are central to what scholars of African American religion do.

What we have set out to do in this massive undertaking is offer a new direction for the field. We do not hold the view that theological education frames the entire enterprise of African American religious studies. It is simply one crucial yet distinct part of a differentiated field of inquiry. In some ways, through our selection of essays for the book, we have attempted to answer the question: Where do we go from here? The extraordinary efforts of scholars in the field up to now have provided us with the requisite tools to engage in the kind of experimentation or tinkering requisite for the moment.

We hold the view that African American religious studies, in part, addresses the various ways the moral languages of black religious expression and their complex relation to the ethical and political aspects of culture inform African American life in particular and American life in general. In our view, it is not necessarily the case "that all other dimensions of the black community should find their expression as aspects of the religious experience of black folks."³ It simply follows from the claim that

1. Gayraud Wilmore, "General Introduction," *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. Gayraud Wilmore (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989), xii–xiii.

2. *Ibid.*, xii.

3. Charles Long, "Assessment and New Departures for a Study of Black Religion in the United States," in Wilmore's *African American Religious Studies*, 38.

black religious experience stands at the center of black life that the institutions, practices, and values singled out by the words “black religion” help us gain insight into the doings and sufferings of these peculiarly modern people. We need not reduce the complexity of the beliefs, choices, and actions of African Americans to expressions of black religion, nor should we overextend the reach of the phrase.

The words “black religion” serve as a conceptual shortcut to manage a number of different practices, beliefs, choices, values, events, and institutions that compose black life in the United States. Such a view requires of scholars in the field—as it does in religious studies in general—a careful and systematic examination of the analytic value of the term “religion” in our analysis of black culture. As we understand it, then, African American religious studies critically engages, among other matters, the way “black religion” is understood—extending the analysis, as it were, beyond an assessment of the place of black religion and its institutions in American society to a more critical analysis of the discursive and ritualistic formations that question traditional scholarly categories and open up new sites for investigation. As one can see, we are not so worried about “arm-chair theorizing.” In fact, we are calling for more careful “meta” reflection on the central category of our field, including its complex relations to sophisticated conceptions of class, gender, sexual orientation, race, and empire.

Historical periodization is important in this regard, and we maintain that five significant historical moments ought to inform our inquiry into African American religious life.⁴ The first stage can be viewed as “African American Religion as the Problem of Slavery.” This period lasted roughly from the mid-eighteenth century to 1863, from the Great Revivals to the Emancipation Proclamation. During this period, African Americans forged a distinctive Christian outlook in response to the institution of slavery. The first African American religious denominations were formed in the North. And we can begin to see the complex relationship between black religious expression and a developing national black politics.

The second stage can be viewed as “African American Religion and the Problem(s) of Emancipation.” This stage, which lasted from 1864 to 1903, covers African American religious life from the period of

4. This periodization is based on Cornel West’s account in *Prophesy Deliverance!* See chap. 4, this volume. *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 101–5. Anniversary edition, with a new preface by the author, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Reconstruction and what Rayford Logan described as the nadir of black history to the publication of Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*. During this period, we see the failed attempts at a genuine multiracial democracy during Reconstruction and the sedimentation of Jim and Jane Crow throughout the South. This time was one of intense institutional terror against blacks in which the racist institutions of the United States rendered the vast majority of African Americans politically powerless, economically vulnerable, and socially degraded. We also see the resurgence of a distinctive black religious language urging a return to Africa, and the formation of Black Baptist Conventions. W.E.B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* offers an account of black religion in "Of the Faith of Our Fathers" and, in some ways, ushers in the treatment of African American religion as an "object of inquiry."

The third stage can be dated from 1903 to 1954, from the publication of *Souls of Black Folk* to the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. This stage can be viewed as "African American Religion, the City, and the Challenge to Racism." During this period, the Great Migration, international migration, and the urbanization of a large segment of the black population transformed black communities in cities and throughout the North. The appearance of twentieth-century black religious phenomena like Daddy Grace and Father Divine, Black Jews, the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, Black Pentecostalism, and the civil religion of the Garvey movement also signaled a plurality of black religious expression that would affect the form and content of black political discourse. We also see the continued development of African American religious studies. Works include master's theses at the University of Chicago; classics such as Carter G. Woodson's *History of the Negro Church*, 1921; Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph Nicholson's *The Negro's Church*, 1933; Arthur Fauset's *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, 1944; and the profound work of Howard Thurman, all of which were produced within the rising tide of resistance to white supremacy in the United States.

The fourth stage can be seen as "African American Religion and the Black Freedom Struggle," and it dates from 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, to 1969 and the publication of James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*. During this phase, we see the importance of the Civil Rights movement, with the prophetic leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the institutional strength of black churches, in efforts to break down the walls of segregation. One also notices the complex relationship between the religious dimensions of the Civil Rights movement and the

Black Power phase, and the significance of Malcolm X and the politics of black nationalism to the struggle for black studies and the emergence of black theology.

The fifth stage, from 1969 to the present, can be viewed as “The Golden Age of African American Religious Studies.” Scholars of African American religion in this period include Albert Raboteau, John Blasingame, Sterling Stuckey, Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, Joseph R. Washington, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and others. Black theologians also produced an extensive body of literature that served as a basis for a vibrant and creative set of reflections about the basic premises of African American religious studies. During this phase, revisions of Cone’s conception of theology are offered. Gender and class critiques become paramount. The work of Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, Katie Cannon, and others are important in this regard. We also begin to see the critical insights of cultural studies impacting the study of African American religion. Essentialist conceptions of race and the racial politics of the Black Power era are criticized. Theological interests stand alongside other approaches to the subject, and African American religious studies begins to emerge from under the rubric of black theology and a singular Christian preoccupation.

Each of these five historical moments must be understood against the backdrop of (1) the implosion of Europe and the development of modernist discourses and their impact on religious life, (2) the emergence of the United States as a world power, and (3) the decolonization of the Third World. These historical coordinates, we believe, situate African American religious studies within a larger set of historical processes that certainly impact the life world of African Americans—holding off any tendency to ghettoize black strivings.

Three categories can help us organize the current state of the field in light of these historical moments: (a) black religious history, (b) black theology, and (c) the sociology of black religion. *Black religious history* involves accounts of the development of black religious institutions and the communities of the faithful that sustain them. This particular sub-field is quite differentiated in that the published works range from general surveys to regional and local studies (church, denominational, and mission histories). Interesting historiographical debates have also emerged as scholars reflect on what can be called “orthodox” accounts of the interwar history of mainline black denominations. The vibrancy of this area of study is reflected in the Afro-American Religious History

Documentary Project, directed by Albert Raboteau of Princeton University and David Wills of Amherst College.⁵

Black theology emerged in the context of the black freedom struggle as a series of intense (academic) reflections about the relation between the historical experiences of black people in the United States and their faith in God. Its emergence coincides with the “golden era” of the study of black religion. Here the experiences of living in a white supremacist culture were explored in order to shed light on the essential meanings of black religious conviction and to underscore the importance of social context for theological reflection. Because black theologians reject what they take to be white interpretations of the gospel, we include under this category black biblical studies in which interpreters of the Bible developed techniques of interpretation informed by black experiences.⁶

Gayraud S. Wilmore and James Cone edited a documentary history of the subfield entitled *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*. Wilmore also published an influential historical survey of African American religious history, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*. In many ways, this work provided the historical backdrop for the black theological project. James Cone remains the central figure in this area. Through various engagements with his work, at least two different approaches have emerged: narrativist theologians who take up the issue of social context but emphasize the importance of stories or narrative and, for some, the framework of Afrocentrism; and black womanist theologians and historians who unsettle the neat story of black theology by introducing the experiences of black women not simply in relation to a racist culture but a sexist one as well.⁷

5. David Wills and Randall K. Burkett, “Afro-American Religious History, 1919–1939: Bibliographic Essay and Resource Guide” (unpublished work); David Wills, “Bibliographical Essay: African-American Religious History,” *Evangelical Studies Bulletin* 11, no. 1 (spring 1994): 6. Ethel L. Williams and Clifton E. Brown, *Afro-American Religious Studies: A Comprehensive Bibliography with Locations in American Libraries* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1979); Michael W. Harris, “African American Religious History in the 1980s: A Critical Review,” *Religious Studies Review* 20, no. 4 (October 1994): 263–75; *African-American Religion: Interpretative Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Timothy Fulop and Albert Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997); *African American Christianity: Essays in History*, ed. Paul E. Johnson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

6. We are thinking about the work of Vincent L. Wimbush and Cane Hope Felder’s edited volume, *Stony the Road We Trod* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

7. For foundational texts in these areas, see Dwight Hopkins and George Cummings, eds., *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narrative* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 2d ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Dwight Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994);

Since the beginning of black theology, the claims of black theologians have sparked intense and widespread debates. The theoretical works of William R. Jones, Charles Long, Cecil Cone, and others pushed the basic assumptions of James Cone's black theological project.⁸ The scope of the debate extended across the discipline from the kinds of historical accounts informing black theology to questions about the organic relation between black theology and actual black churches. As Victor Anderson notes in his book, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*:

most criticisms centered around the relation of black theology to black churches. Early critics asked how black theology could be a theology of the black churches if it fundamentally disentangles itself from the creed and confessions, as well as the liturgical practices that structure the black churches. . . . Others asked, in what sense could black theology be black since its theological method was derived from white theologians, notably Karl Barth and Paul Tillich?⁹

Still, others criticized the work for its lack of attention to class and its complicity in patriarchy. These debates in and around black theology constitute a discursive formation, because the arguments and counterarguments refer to the same object, share a similar style, and support a strategy, a common institutional or political pattern.¹⁰ In this vein the discursive

Julian Kunnie, *Models of Black Theology: Issues in Class, Culture, and Gender* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1994); Riggins R. Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993); and Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). See also Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Emilie M. Townes, ed., *Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

8. William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Cecil Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville: AMEC, 1975). Also see Dwight Hopkins's recent edited volume, *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James Cone's Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999).

9. Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 90.

10. M. Cousins and A. Hussain, *Michel Foucault* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 84–85.

practice of black theology (and the sheer volume of the published works that compose it) produces meaning about what constitutes the field of African American religious studies.

The sociology of black religion has always been given some attention in African American religious studies, stemming from the assumption that black religious and secular life are so intertwined that no reasonable distinction between the two can be made if we are to understand the complex workings of these folk. This assumption informs the early scholarly works in the field. From Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* and Woodson's *History of the Negro Church* to Mays and Nicholson's *The Negro's Church*, the study of black religion functioned, on one level, as a synecdoche for talking about the whole of black America. Other works also explored the role and function of black religious institutions in black society. Examples of this literature include Fauset's *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Church* (1964), and C. Eric Lincoln's edited volume, *The Black Experience in Religion* (1974), as well as his *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (1984) and the coauthored work with Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990). The sociology of black religion involves then (at uneven levels of subtlety) politics, cultural criticism, and the study of a variety of black institutions that intersected with black religion.

With this historical periodization and these three extant categories in mind, this volume aims to broaden our conception of the field and to take seriously the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to African American religious practices. History, theology, and what can be called cultural criticism remain constitutive subareas of the field. One of our major tasks is to urge that we think about these areas within a broader framework that is not reducible to theological claims.

For us, the subject matter of African American religious studies includes the experiences of people of African descent shaped in the environment of the "New World" and understood with religious languages that interpret and evaluate those experiences to effectively transform them. The New World constitutes the place of encounter between various cultures—the primal scene where Africa and the West meet, and new peoples emerge in the aftermath of the violence that followed this fateful encounter. The New World, then, is the site of displacement, appropriation, and creolization as people adjust and adapt to the new environs and to the operations of power that define some as free persons and others as slaves and slave owners.

This encounter occurs against the backdrop of European modernity. Transformations in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres in

Europe unleashed with the Reformation and consolidated by the nineteenth century changed how individuals and groups understood themselves, others, and the world around them. The emergence of secular forms of political power and an industrialized capitalist order, the decline of ecclesiastical authority and traditional social arrangements, and the sedimentation of a new way of producing and classifying knowledge provided “modern subjects” with a distinctive set of tools to make their world. The underside of these developments, however, consisted in the trafficking of black bodies, the subordination of women, and the emergence of new class formations.

African American religious studies begins with the assumption that it is a New World phenomenon, shaped by the complex variation of European modernity which evolved as American culture, and the intricate transactions between marginalized Africans and the American culture in which these people were both participants and victims.¹¹ African American religious studies as it developed in the United States, then, examines how these peculiar, black modern subjects came to terms with their status as slaves, struggled for dignity and freedom, and how they imagined a future for their children in the context of a democratic experiment in which, ideally, individuals were accorded dignity irrespective of their background, freedom was considered a natural right, *and* black people were held as chattel.

Of course, these intricate transactions employed the tools of the Old and New World. Africans brought with them the languages, beliefs, and practices of particular forms of life, which gave the ideas of democracy a different sound (a blue note perhaps) and aided in the construction of new institutions responsive to the needs of everyday life under the limiting conditions of slavery.¹² This statement is not to suggest a fixed conception of African culture in which New World articulations by people of African descent are understood as simply African. We want to acknowledge that wherever people of African descent are, Africa speaks—even, at times, with new words and inflections. To be sure, Africa was present, as Stuart Hall notes,

in the everyday life of the slave quarters, in the languages and patois of the plantation, in names and words, often disconnected from their taxonomies, in the secret syntactical structures through which these languages were spoken, in the stories and tales told to children, in

11. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* 22.

12. Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

religious practice and beliefs in the spiritual life, the arts, crafts, music and rhythms of slave and post-emancipation society.¹³

A central question in African American religious studies is how do we account for this African presence? How do we understand its power in the religious imagination of African Americans, its influence on the form and content of black religious expression, and its centrality to a conception of black identity forged in the struggle for freedom in the New World? These questions must be examined in light of the fact that black moderns created something new in the face of prevailing circumstances that can be described best as absurd.

One of the most important languages used to make sense of the absurd circumstances of slavery was that of Christianity. From about the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, many African Americans converted to Christianity and found a way of interpreting their situation and hoping against hope that one day they would be free. The evangelical traditions of Baptists and Methodists were particularly appealing to the slaves, because of their emphasis on individual experience, the ecstatic nature of their worship services, and the belief that all were equal before God. African Americans found, then, in the Christian gospel as it was preached during the Great Revivals, liberating possibilities in their personal experiences of conversion, in the family resemblance of evangelical worship services with practices of an African past, and in a vocabulary that enabled the slave to escape the psychic effects of slavery. They were no longer extensions of a white master's will. Instead, many Christian slaves came to see themselves as a unique—even chosen—people with a different moral sense about them, capable of distinguishing intuitively the wrongness of slavery and racial discrimination and the rightness of their common complaint, because of their distinctive relationship to God. This connection with God allowed them to step outside of the master-slave relationship, which defined them as a means to the master's ends, and to see themselves as self-determining agents.

Theological, existential, and political considerations followed from this particular view. African Americans had to reconcile their conception of God with the reality of their suffering. As such, the problem of evil loomed large as a distinctive theological outlook was forged amid the bru-

13. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 398.

tal realities of antebellum America. How are we to think about God, the gospel, Jesus, and slavery? J.W.C. Pennington's sermon in 1845 captures best what's at stake in this question and the unique theology that emerged from its answer:

If you stand commended to the guidance of the Word of God, you are bound to know its position in reference to certain overt acts that crowd the land with curses. Take the last and greatest of the curses that I named above. I mean slavery. Is the word of God silent on this subject? I, for one, desire to know. My repentance, my faith, my hope, my love, and my perseverance all, all, I conceal it not, I repeat it, all turn upon this point. If I am deceived here—if the word of God does sanction slavery, I want another book, another repentance, another faith, and another hope!¹⁴

So, in some ways, the distinctive theology of black Christianity stood as a loud rebuke of white Christianity. The adjectives matter here. For God, the gospel, and Jesus are all adapted to and understood within the context of the evil of white supremacy.

Existentially, this black Christian outlook informed how African Americans understood themselves, others, and the world around them. The personal experiences of conversion enabled otherwise degraded individuals to see themselves as worthwhile and precious in God's sight. This sense of self-worth was fortified by the religious rhetorics used in the construction of a communal identity. African Americans, through biblical analogy, came to see themselves as the children of God, linking as it were the freedom of the Israelites with their own eventual liberation. This religious symbology, however, did not yield a facile optimism. A tragicomic sensibility—in a blues-shaped idiom—informed the way African Americans imagined possibility for themselves and their children. They understood the limiting conditions of the world of action and drew on the power of their faith to confront candidly individual and collective experiences of evil with little expectation of ridding the world of all evil. A blues ethos

14. *A Two Years' Absence or a Farewell Sermon, preached in the Fifth Congregational Church, by J.W.C. Pennington*, Nov. 2, 1845 (Hartford, Conn., 1845). Also quoted in Hortense Spillers, "Moving On Down the Line: Variations on the African American Sermon," in Dominick LaCapra, *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

informed their beliefs, choices, and actions as they engaged an environment shot through with sin and impinging daily upon their lives.

African American Christianity provided then, to some extent, a political language to engage American slavery and racism. To be sure, the religious symbology used in the construction of a national black community stood as a form of critique of American society for betraying its ideals as well as a means for positive self-identification. America was supposed to be the “shining city on the hill,” the home of the “New Israelites.” African Americans, however, often figured America as Egypt and its slaveholding citizens as Pharaoh. This figural rereading of America emerged out of the black church, historically the most important institution in black America.

The “black church” (whether the invisible institution of the South or the black churches and denominations of the North) was the principle site of public engagement for African Americans. Here black individuals could participate directly in deliberation about their circumstances without public humiliation from white Americans. (At least, this was the case for black men, given the patriarchal assumptions informing the organization of black public space. Most women were relegated to subordinate positions in the private domain.) The church also housed numerous activities, from schools to social functions. Indeed, this institution gave birth to black civil society, provided a leadership class in black ministers, and as Du Bois noted in *Souls of Black Folk*, was “peculiarly the expression of the inner ethical life of a people in a sense seldom true elsewhere.”¹⁵ Not only did the church serve as a site for deliberation and social activity, it also—if Du Bois is right—provided social and institutional moorings for the ethical utterances of black America.

Yet and still, African American Christianity and its institutional expression remained ambivalently connected to white America. In fact, to tell the story of its development is, in some significant sense, to tell the history of American religion. Both are intimately—to borrow a usage from James Baldwin—connected, and to study one without the other is to lose sight of how race fundamentally shapes America’s political and cultural landscape. The ambivalence marks the “in but not of” status of African Americans: the fact that the vocabularies acquired from the discourses of democracy and Christianity were shadowed by the specter of slavery and white supremacy. As such, the appropriation of Christianity was both enabling and an accommodation in its political outlook, making possible a critical insurgent politics as well as containing the more radical possi-

15. W.E.B. Du Bois, “Faith of Our Fathers,” in *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 499.

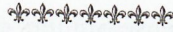
bilities of that politics. Hortense Spillers captures this ambivalence with her question: "Is it too much to say that the African could not *but* have become a Christian in the sociopolitical context of the United States, as a *strategy* for giving his or her historical ground and [humanity] here?"¹⁶

African American religious studies examines the complex and overlapping relationship between black religious discourses and the American ideology, and their relation to discourses of race, gender, class, and other values that continue to challenge our democratic ideals. What is the relationship of black religious traditions and black politics? How has this relationship changed as the political and social realities of America have changed? Each of the questions should be examined, we maintain, without recourse to easy either-or accounts of the relationship between black religion and politics that force one to say definitively that African American Christianity was either revolutionary in content or accommodationist in its political outlook. We suggest instead that a thick historicist sensibility ought to inform how we understand the connection between black religion and politics, and the various understandings that connection make possible for effective action in the present.

We have organized this book, in some ways, to tell a story about what black agents have done and made in light of the historical conditions that give their beliefs, choices, and actions meaning. Attention is given to the various fissures that disrupt monolithic conceptions of African American religious life. Gender, class, sexual orientation, and empire complicate the kind of story that can be told. Through interpretations of African American history—or better, in efforts to understand the different ways African Americans have attempted to solve crises—scholars of African American religion seek to comprehend what informs our contemporary setting, and better equip us to respond to the challenges confronting black communities and the country in general. In this sense, the historical work is, in a significant way, ethical work: a way of transforming prevailing realities that we view as bad by telling thick stories that provide us with the tools to engage in intelligently guided experimentation to make life better for ourselves and for future generations. In short, we hold the view that African American religious studies at its best tries to make theoretically explicit what is implicit in history, to describe and demystify cultural and social practices and offer solutions to urgent problems besetting African Americans.¹⁷

16. Spillers, "Moving On Down the Line," in her book *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 263.

17. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* 22.



With the historical periodization we have offered and the three categories of history, theology, and cultural criticism as our guide, we have organized the book into eight sections. Parts 1 and 2 frame the more historical sections with theoretical reflections about African American religion. Part 1 introduces the reader to some of the classic formulations in the field. Here the student can acquire a sense of the general themes and different ideological approaches that have, in some ways, defined the study of African American religion.

Part 2 represents the various ways scholars have thought about the field at a certain level of abstraction. One can get a sense, for example, of the different assumptions informing sociological reflections on black religion in Orlando Patterson's essay and the pioneering work of C. Eric Lincoln. Students should also see the distinctive approaches to the study of African American religion evidenced in the essays of Cornel West and Charles Long, with West drawing on the pragmatist tradition and Long using a phenomenological approach. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and David Wills offer historical accounts that take seriously the impact of gender and race on the kind of story that can be told about African American religious history in particular and American religious history in general. Students should think about parts 1 and 2 together, and note the threads of continuity and discontinuity between the classic and more recent accounts of African American religion.¹⁸

The remaining parts of the book follow the historical periodization we have suggested. Part 3 addresses slavery. Part 4 concerns itself with post-emancipation. The essays in part 5 take up the issues of migration and religious plurality. Part 6 addresses the significance of African American religion and the black freedom struggle. The essays in part 7 should be read in relation to part 6: they concern themselves with the discourse of black theology and its critics. Part 8 suggests, to some extent, the impact of cultural studies on the field and offers examples of different venues for scholarly work in and around African American religion. The selection of essays in each of these sections reflects our attempt to capture the inter-

18. We also urge that these essays be read alongside the other classical literature in religious studies (e.g., the works of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, Rudolph Otto, Mary Douglas, Mircea Eliade, William James, Mary Daly, and Clifford Geertz) to (1) demonstrate the extent to which scholars of African American religion are in conversation with more general theoretical reflections on religion and (2) to illustrate how the specific histories of people of African descent "color" their thinking about religion broadly understood.

disciplinary character of the field and to resist a kind of theological reductionism. We have included in each part essays on the gendered dimensions of African American religion. We reject an additive approach to questions of gender. As such, we decided not to separate the essays into a distinct section, because we believe gender to be constitutive of any approach to the subject matter.

In the end, each part takes up some of the issues we have briefly explored in this introduction. As a whole, the essays demonstrate the following points about African American religious studies:

1. African American religious studies begins with the assumption that it is a New World phenomenon, shaped by the complex variation of European modernity that evolved as American culture, and the intricate transactions between marginalized Africans and the American culture in which these people were both participants and victims.
2. This field addresses the various ways in which the axiological and existential languages of black religious expression and their complex relation to the ethical, political, and economic aspects of culture inform African American life in particular and American life in general.
3. African American religious studies critically engages the way “black religion” is understood—extending the analysis beyond an assessment of the place of black religion and its institutions in American society to a more critical analysis of the discursive and ritualistic formations that question traditional scholarly categories and open up new sites for investigation.
4. The discipline examines the complex and overlapping relationship between black religious discourses and the American ideology, and their relation to discourses of race, gender, class, and other values that continue to challenge our democratic ideals.

Hopefully, each of these formulations can aid in the continued development of new visions and approaches to the study of African American religion.

Personal Acknowledgments

Such an ambitious undertaking could not be the result of just the two of us. Many people have contributed to the completion of this project. Without Angela Jackson’s extraordinary vision and courage the book would have never materialized. We are truly indebted to her. We also want to

thank Mary Ann Rodriguez, whose diligence and organization streamlined the process of acquiring permissions. We are also grateful to Stephanie Egnotovich, our editor. Her excitement for the project pushed us to complete the book. We are especially thankful to Kijan Bloomfield and Lauren Flinn, our two undergraduate assistants at Bowdoin College. And we must mention the support of our families, the sustaining force behind our work: Marie and Langston; Zeytun and Clifton.

Finally, we want to thank all of those scholars and activists, particularly the late James M. Washington, who have labored over the years to make the field of African American religion so vibrant and vital. This is our small contribution to what has been and will continue to be a labor of love.