

Introduction: The Study of African American Religions

As a young schoolteacher, W. E. B. Du Bois traveled south and happened upon an African American worship service. Reflecting later on what he had witnessed he wrote, “Those who have not thus witnessed the frenzy of a Negro revival in the untouched backwoods of the South can but dimly realize the religious feeling of the slave; as described, such scenes appear grotesque and funny, but as seen they are awful. Three things characterized this religion of the slave,—the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy.” Du Bois went on to lament the ways this profound religious phenomenon became lost in translation among churches outside of the region.

The mass of “gospel” hymns which has swept through American churches and well-nigh ruined our sense of song consists largely of debased imitations of Negro melodies made by ears that caught the jingle but not the music, the body but not the soul, of the Jubilee songs. It is thus clear that the study of Negro religion is not only a vital part of the history of the Negro in America, but no uninteresting part of American history.¹

1. Herbert Aptheker, ed., *The Souls of Black Folk* (Milwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1973), 189–206.

As Du Bois advised, to fully understand African American religions, one must wrestle with the American context within which the traditions grew and transformed over time. In fact, Du Bois's analysis alludes to a central theme in American religious history that undergirds his framing of slave tradition: declension. The earliest Puritan accounts of life in seventeenth-century New England decry the decline of the community's commitment and dedication to religious life. Each subsequent generation failed to meet the standards set by their forebears. As Perry Miller has shown, the second generation of Puritans struggled to live up to and define their own "errand in the wilderness" in America. The creation of the Halfway Covenant in 1662, which extended baptism but not communion until the individual offered evidence of a conversion experience, symbolized the ever-lowering bar that had to be lived up to to be granted entry into the Puritan way of life. As Puritans moved further away in time from John Winthrop's sermon on the *Arbella*, the less "Puritan" and more "American" the communities became.² Within African American religious history, the theme of declension begins with the Atlantic slave trade and its potential impact on the retention of African culture in the New World. If African spirituality is presumed to have existed in its purest forms in Africa, if it survived to America (there is much debate surrounding the issue), is it merely a fading shadow of what came before? Notions of what constitutes "authentic" African American religion and which elements have moved furthest from those original sources are fluid throughout American religious history. At the close of the nineteenth century, as Du Bois exemplifies, nostalgia about the purity of slave religion rose to new heights in the face of rising black churches with more formalized institutions and worship practices in the North. The Great

2. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1956).

Migration northward in the early twentieth century romanticized the South that was left behind, and today, there are those who lament the apparent declining role of the Black Church in black communities in the post–civil rights era.

Defining “African American Religions”

Du Bois also eloquently summarizes some of the key issues in the study of African American religious history. One might be called the search for the essence of African American religions. What makes them distinctive and how do you know a “real” manifestation of it from a “debased imitation”? Du Bois notes the elements that he finds essential to slave religion: the preacher, the music, and the “frenzy.” In contrast, after the Great Migration, northern black churches are often characterized as being colder, stiffer, more formal, and presumably more Anglicized than their southern religious counterparts. In other circles, slave songs were derided as base superstitions while the musical interpretations of groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers were heralded as the “classical” take on the spiritual. These examples illustrate that there has never been one “authentic” African American religion, but rather individuals and communities have produced varied cultural and spiritual expressions that have been understood at varying times from their perspective as the center of African American religious life. Often African American religions are understood as constituting the exuberant black Protestant preacher, emotional worship services, call and response, chanted sermons, and spirituals. While these are components of certain traditions, when extrapolated broadly or defined too narrowly, they inadvertently create an “authenticity” checklist that is far from all encompassing and, by extension, dismisses all of the communities that do not embrace these particular beliefs and practices. While declension and notions of authenticity are a part

of the conversation, this textbook moves fluidly between the overarching big picture umbrella concept of “African American religions” and the diversity and variety of beliefs, practices, and traditions that African Americans have brought, created, and transformed in America.

African American religions are a diverse group of beliefs and practices that emerged from the diasporic experiences of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic slave trade that forcefully and tragically dispersed people of African descent across the western hemisphere. The traditional religions that had informed the worldviews of Africans were transported through the middle passage to the shores of the Americas where they were transformed, as they had been for centuries, to make sense of their current context and conditions. Yet, what aspects of African Traditional Religions survived to the Americas? How have African American religions influenced and been shaped by American religious history?

The concept of “African American religions” implies that there is something distinctive about the beliefs and practices of the religious traditions of which African Americans are a part. Yet, only in certain contexts do we apply a racial or ethnic descriptor for not only a particular community, but to an entire approach to religion. This tactic is most often deemed appropriate for the study of minority religions rather than those with a predominately white membership. One might read about Native American religions, but one rarely encounters a book addressing “Caucasian religion.” “The Black Church” is often invoked as a category within African American religious history, but one would be hard-pressed to find similar attention to “The White Church.” Instead, other traits and categories rise to the fore to distinguish between majority religions, such as traditions, beliefs, practices, denominations, regions, etc. The growing field of Whiteness studies has illuminated the often invisible,

but very real expectations and courtesies extended to those in the dominant race. This privilege is demonstrated in the traditional historical narratives that highlight the complexity and centrality of the immigrant experiences of European Americans as they arrive on the shores of America and begin shaping the contours of American religious history. Yet, in the portrayals of the religious histories of many people of color, race is often assumed to be the central uniting and motivating factor for a wide range of worldviews and actions. Although the “diversity” of African American religions is regularly invoked, the presumption of a shared outlook on life stretching back across black communities through space and time is resilient. This monolithic portrayal of African American religions is reinforced by the historical oppression and racism expressed toward particular communities of color in the United States. Legal proscriptions such as slavery and segregation that forcibly separated African Americans from the broader European American society can give the impression that African American religions existed in isolation, preserved in their purity through a type of ideological quarantine. Yet, despite the disparate power dynamics, it is important to keep the focus not only on how the context of America shaped African American religions, but the ways an African presence influenced the course of American religious history as well.

The Impact of the Middle Passage

Few historical events have been as tragic as the “middle passage” that brought slaves across the Atlantic from primarily the west coast of Africa to the New World. Captured as prisoners of war by rival societies, kidnapped, or sold into slavery, African traders marched their slaves, chained together in twos by their hands and feet, to coastal forts where purchasers examined them to determine the best commodities. Branded with the insignia of their new owners,

Africans waited in subterranean dungeons for their ships to depart to the New World, although many would succumb before entering the ship's hull. To maximize economic profits, Africans were packed as tightly as possible with no room to move. Over the six- to sixteen-week voyage, these conditions often led to wide outbreaks of disease including fever, smallpox, and dysentery. Estimates vary, but most sources place the mortality rate somewhere between 25 and 40 percent for the journey to the Americas. Suicide attempts and slave rebellions during the middle passage were common. Only a fraction of African slaves came to North America. For most, the destination was the West Indies. Between 1619 and 1808, which marked the congressional abolishment of the slave trade, over 400,000 Africans were brought to North America, while eight million debarked in South America and the Caribbean.³

Given the barbarity of the middle passage, the mid-twentieth century witnessed heated academic debates in the burgeoning study of African American religions over whether slaves arrived to the New World "tabula rasa" or with their traditional African religious systems intact. One of the earliest pioneers in the study of African religious retentions in the New World was Melville J. Herskovits, who identified an extensive range of "Africanisms" in African American religious life in the Americas. While acknowledging the prevalence of African culture in Latin America and the Caribbean, other scholars, such as sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, questioned the broad-reaching presumptions about the retention of African culture in North America. From this perspective, the "seasoning" process during enslavement that sought to purge slaves of their African heritage, intertribal warfare that led to the capture of mostly young men, and linguistic and cultural differences within the slave

3. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

population all conspired to allow only the most meager connections to the African homeland that was left behind. Small slave-to-white population ratios, tight restrictions on movement and gatherings, in-group pressure to assimilate, and the destruction of the African family unit were also central factors that scholars pointed toward to conclude that there was a loss of African heritage. Each successive generation born in America increased the distance from a firsthand knowledge of African rites and practices.⁴ From this paradigm, the origins of African American religious history begins not on the shores of West Africa, but the plantations of the South and the transformation of European American Christianity within the slave cabins and private moments of worship and devotion. Today it would be difficult to find academic voices suggesting that there are absolutely no cultural retentions or “survivals” that inform African American religions. Yet arguments over the persuasiveness and the basis of certain claims and evidence used to establish connections to Africa are no less contentious. While scholars have not been shy about rendering comparisons between ancient African rites and contemporary African American religious beliefs and practices, there remains a methodological challenge to determine the best manner to demonstrate, substantiate, and validate these assertions. Should African American religions be studied individually or comparatively, and what are the implications of both approaches? If through comparisons, to what should African American religions be contrasted?

The Search for African Retentions

The sheer size and the diversity of beliefs and practices found on the continent make tracing the lineage and religious culture of one

4. Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).