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African American Religion outside of the Black Church: Rethinking the Framework

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I am painfully aware that the field that I have committed myself to for the past 15 years is at a crossroads, both disciplinarily, and in the numbers of people committed to the study of AFAM religion from a historical perspective. Figures such as Al Raboteau, James Washington, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Milton Sernett, Randall Burkett, and many others pursued important work in the field and helped to train students. Despite the intellectual production that they and others have produced, there are only a handful of scholars who are specifically trained as African American religious historians, and two of them are sitting on this panel.

While we are here to honor the opening of the African American Museum in the fall, church records languish in damp basements, attics, or are thrown away by grieving relatives who do not understand the treasure that their departed relatives held onto. Newspapers and other print publications remain untouched, describing religious groups in the urban space that were labeled storefronts, or cults. Projects remain undone, like the African American Documentary project that gathered historical documents from 1444 to the present. Those documents remain in boxes at

Amherst, languishing, awaiting the touch of graduate students or historians that can bring these documents together to form a missing part of the history of the spirituality and religious organization of persons of African descent.

That said, while I am very excited about the prospects for how African American Religion will be a part of this new museum, I am also vexed about the prospects for my field, and the historical work that remains to be done. So while this won't be a triumphal message, it will be a talk that expresses my concerns, love, and critiques of our field. I have been thinking about one question in particular the last few years that has captured my attention: What would it mean to decenter the protestant dominated, male centered, civil rights tilted narrative of how we tell the story of Black religious life and spirituality in America? What would scholars, students, and the public gain by shifting the gaze and the intellectual production away from this overwhelming protestant hegemony of Black Religion in the American context?

In Tracey Hucks and Diane Diakite's article entitled "Africana Religious Studies, Towards a Trans-disciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field", Hucks and Diakite propose that the study of Africana Religions must disconnect itself from the previous debates posited by Melville Herskovits, E. Franklin Frazier, and other theologians, suggesting that "In researching and making available the diversity of US Africana American Religious cultures and the range of encounters and exchanges that have produced them, secular historians have much to offer religionists."(Diakite, Hucks, p. 55)

Hucks and Diakite's challenge to reframe the study of Africana Religions is a challenge to those of us who teach and research African American Religious history. Following the well-worn trail of African American Religion defined as protestant church experience, patriarchal norms, fight for civil rights, obscure the religious stories that waiting for discovery, and

dissemination.. The idea and ideal of the Black church, and the narrative of slavery, freedom, civil rights and the “promised land” of freedom, economic empowerment, and the blessings of God have permeated the publics’ imagination of what constitutes Black religion, history, and the role of religion in public life. We must acknowledge that these images are not constructed in a vacuum; historians, anthropologists and sociologists who had particular ways of looking at religion through the lens of their fields helped their formulations along.

My presentation today discusses new directions in light of Diane Diakite and Tracey Hucks exposition on what they term field of Africana Religious Studies. I want to expand their notion of African Religious Studies to include African American Religious history, and the unique ways reframing that history can help us to expand the notion of what spirituality and religion are historically for people of African descent, and to reorient what we consider as “African American religion or spirituality to include missing and marginalized groups overshadowed by a protestant dominated narrative. I want to briefly introduce some areas as a starting point to reframe this dominant, worn narrative: Moving away from a protestant centered explanation for the Christianity of enslaved Africans in the Americas to the consideration of Kongolese Christianity, and the confraternities created as a rich source for the rise and expansion of Catholic style of Christianity in the AFAM context: second, how religious groups such as Garveyism, Father Divine’s Peace mission, and others provide a stronger critique to both racism and protestant hegemony by creating spaces of spirituality for African Americans in the United states, and Gender and sexuality as critique of the conservative strain of Protestant derived religiosity and gender norms in America. Allowing this protestant centered history of African American religion to continue closes off the possibilities to discuss issues relevant to the historic beliefs and practices of African American. Understand, I am not advocating totally dropping

away from this history, rather, I suggest that these religious complexes provide the space for creating religious worlds outside of an imposed Eurocentric worldview and spirituality.

The predominant narrative that has dominated the field of AFAM religious history is the recognition that there are African retentions in the religious practices of enslaved Africans in America, and that the fusion of European Protestantism (Baptist, Anglicanism, Methodism, etc.) replaced or incorporated African religious practices. Challenging that narrative is the recognition of the prevalence of Islamic faith and practice in the Americas, but the presence of Kongoese Christianity, and how the fusion of Catholicism with traditional African religion changes both the geography and practices of African American religion. Instead of looking at established Protestantism and the spread of Christianity, looking at the relationship of the Kongoese Christians in the Low Country, New York, Florida and Louisiana gives a more nuanced, inclusive history of African American Religion. David Daniels in an essay entitled “Kongoese Christianity in the Americas of the 17th and 18th century” asserts that Kongoese Christianity was a discernable current within the stream of early diasporic Christianity in America. Rather than focusing in on the Herskovits –Frazier retentions debate, Daniels chooses to fuse the Christian and non Christian elements of confraternities and Kongoese Christianity in order to show how this religious complex, and not the narratives of awakenings formed a foundation for the growth of African Catholicism and other expressions outside of Protestantism in America. Jeroen Dewulf, associate professor and director of Dutch studies at Berkely, has shown in a piece entitled *Black brotherhoods in North America: Afro-Iberian and West- Central African influences* that the previous associations with “Election Day” ceremonies for slaves who crowned a king were not emulation of European traditions, but rather, as Dewulf asserts, “ have their roots in Catholic brotherhoods brought to the Americas from Africa.” These Confraternities

and practices of Kongolese Christianity in America linked enslaved West Africans in America to a shared experience that was recognizable, despite linguistic differences.

Kongolese Christianity and Catholicism are not the only ways to reframe the AFAM religious history. While this history helps to displace Protestantism as the defining religious experience for AfAM history, attentiveness to new religious movements, such as the Moorish Science temple, Garveyism, The Nation of Islam, Father Divine's peace movements, and numerous other small storefront religious groups can help us understand the construction of identity and religion in the midst of an oppressive imposition of Christianity and White supremacy. These movements grappled not only with new ideas about religion and practices amongst African Americans, but helped to construct identities for their adherents and in their belief systems to counteract the systemic racism in America. Judith's Wiesenfeld's forthcoming book "New World Coming: Black Religion and Racial identity" is a welcome intervention in our understanding of how groups previously only identified as "sects and cults" played an important role in interrogating racial identity by changing their names and confronting the movement. We overlook to the fields peril the innovative trajectories of Spiritism, hoodoo, and other forms of religiosity of African Americans historically, both as a way to connect to a history of people of African descent in the diaspora, as well as a counter narrative to the imposition of racial ideologies of African Americans. I have always been personally intrigued about the trajectory from Henry McNeal Turner's assertion that God was a Black man, to 20th century "Gods of the Metropolis: like Father Divine, whose life is depicted on the doors of his shrine at his Woodmont estate in Gladwyne Pa. The bronze doors depict Divine coming down from the heavens with Caucasian features, but when he is on the earth, his visage is that of a Black Man.

Pentecostals too, were given the moniker of sect and cult status in the 20th century. The Church of God in Christ leader C.H. Mason the first Presiding Bishop has a famous picture of him surrounded by his roots and his “wonders of nature” that he used to preach and pray for healing for members. This fusion of “rootwork” and Christian beliefs shows that the fusion of traditional African religious practices, Christianity, and spirituality has a longer trajectory than our historiographical narrative might currently suggest.

These groups are not sects and cults in the sense of anthropologists and sociologists, rather, they are religious innovators attempting to connect their belief systems and practices to African diaspora. This counter history represents another kind of protest, the protest to create a religious world not bound by a white Jesus or meekness, but an assertive, self-defining religion. While our traditional narratives have lauded racial uplift as being infused with a prophetic Christianity against racism, what would it mean to consider histories of African Americans and non-Christian traditions as the true expositors of racial uplift and promotion of self determination? Perhaps the focus on the grand narrative of slavery freedom, uplift and civil rights has blinded religious historians to the creative innovations of so called “outsiders” that in many ways are connected to the diasporic experience of Africa and other religions in the diaspora.

Taking apart the protestant hegemony in African American Religion also calls for a realization that “gender norms and sexuality” defined by mainstream Protestant denominations are not sufficient to cover the varieties of relationships, religion, spirituality and organizing done by women or LGBT persons. The quotidian relationships of women in Rhon Manigault Bryants book “Talking to the Dead, Religion Music and Lived memory among Gullah Geechee women explores the religious world of women who communicate with their ancestors through their

hybrid religious practices, keeping alive the traditions of story telling basket making and singing from their ancestors. Or in Deirdre Crumbley's book *Saved And Sanctified*, which chronicles the establishment of a Pentecostal church by a woman born in the Late 19th Century. The "church" a sabbatarian Pentecostal church, has only had one leader, Mother, and on Mother's death, she continues to lead the church through her audiotapes and an elders board established by her. While we have often thought about this kind of semi-divine leadership about men, having a woman lead this group even after death brings up many interesting questions about leadership, gender, and authority. Consider also the history of black nuns in America. While many only know about the Sisters of the Holy Family or the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the history of Black Nuns and their engagement in the civil rights movement is being chronicled in a forthcoming book by Shannen Dee Williams, Assistant Professor at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Her book *Subversive Habits, Black Nuns and the long struggle to Desegregate Catholic America*, will be an important contribution both to African American Catholic history, and the broader history of the civil rights movement.

All of these examples offer a different way in which to consider fresh ways to engage the religious history of African Americans. I have appreciated the fresh beginning that Diakite and Hucks have called the field to, but it is incumbent upon African American Religious historians to make a concerted effort to engage these religious stories, groups and beliefs not simply as "aberrations" but as a core part of what African American Religion and Spirituality mean. By disrupting the privileging of the Protestant narrative to African American Religious history, a broader view of African American Religion's place within the study of African Religions can occur. While I also have much appreciation for the work of Sociologists and anthropologists on African American Religion, historians are the key to articulating this work. I

am hopeful that before the small cohort of us working in AFAM religious history retire, that we will be able to finally have a book that will integrate much of the religious experience of African Americans, without having to lean on the overworked “black church” descriptor of African American belief.