

A conference sponsored by the American Historical Association and the National Museum of African American History and Culture with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and HISTORY™

The Future of the African American Past

May 19-21, 2016
Washington, DC

The Category of “African American Religion”

Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Princeton University

Available online at <https://futureafampast.si.edu/conference-papers>
© Do not cite or circulate without the author’s permission

I grew up Catholic on the coast of Mississippi. It is an old black Catholic community, one rooted in the Josephite tradition. The Josephite Society of the Sacred Heart was formed in 1871. Its mission was to serve black freedmen and women in the aftermath of the Civil War “through the proclamation of the Gospel and personal witness.” They established a presence on the coast of Mississippi in 1907 with the founding of St. Peter the Apostle Parish in Pascagoula. My father’s family belonged to this church. Generations of Glaudes were christened here, took their first communion, and received confirmation. We were part of the roughly 1.2 million black Catholics in the United States.

The Catholic church I grew up in was radically different from my grandmother’s. Mine bore the effects of Vatican II and conducted its ministry in a post–Jim Crow world (although the “white” Catholic church still existed across town). No more liturgies in Latin, our priest often wore Kente cloth, and we had a gospel choir. My mother, along with her friends in the choir, would sing, “Soon and very soon we are going to see the King.” They would rhythmically sway back and forth, and give God the glory in praise song while the members of St. Peter’s sat quietly with a slight rock of the shoulders and a reserved pat of the foot

that kept time. Our church choir was even invited to a local gospel festival. Choirs from churches all over our little town gathered to sing and worship. This was my first experience of black Pentecostal and Baptist traditions.

I sat at the far left corner of the pew in a stereotypically small southern church house. The seat was available only because we arrived early. The church was packed. It was hot. Mississippi heat has a way of sticking to you; it slows the pace of life but adds a level of intensity to any activity. The room was thick with sweat and anticipation. An older, heavy-set woman sat next to me. She wore a bright floral-print dress, and her hair was freshly pressed (I could smell the effects of the hot comb). Beads of sweat trickled down the side of her face.

“Scoot down a bit, baby,” she said.

I moved as far as I could, but there wasn't much room. As the preacher began to say a few words before offering prayer, I sat in amazement. He was a poet and, unlike Father Veal, who was so mind-numbingly deliberate in everything he said, this man made the Gospel come alive.

The preacher started to pray. No one stood. Everyone bowed his or her heads. I heard something strange and incredible. He started slowly. The congregation murmured in agreement. His pace quickened. His words began to take on a rhythm, and the folk began to shout back: “Amen” “Yes, Lord” “Yes, Jesus.” The woman next to me rocked back and forth, bumping against me as she called back to the preacher. I had never heard or seen anything like this. St. Peter's, on the other hand, was quiet, the priest spoke in hushed tones. But this preacher prayed with more intensity. As he ended, everyone seemed on edge and emotions threatened to burst open the church. Then the unique sound of a Hammond organ took over, and one of the choirs marched in clapping their hands and singing at the tops of their lungs. This was true theater. The music took my breath away.

Women with the phrasing of Sarah Vaughn and the sound of Bessie Smith sang “On Calvary,” and men, who could give B. B. King and Sam Cooke a run for their money, crooned “I Don't Feel No Ways

Tired.” The small church literally rocked as choirs and the congregation shouted and praised. I sat with my mouth agape, when suddenly the woman next to me began to speak in a loud whisper. She started to shake, waving her right hand in the air, saying, “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus.” I sat next to her in horror as she fell back in the pew and onto me. She had “caught the spirit.” This is what W. E. B. Du Bois, the noted African American intellectual, referred to as the “the pythian madness, a demoniac possession that lent terrible reality to song and word.” And like Du Bois, such an experience was completely foreign to me and yet wholly familiar.

Here, in this little house of worship on the coast of Mississippi, I experienced what Du Bois described in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as the three things that characterized the religion of the slave: the preacher, the music, and the frenzy. For him, each one of these accounts for the distinctiveness of black religious life and sets the stage for the importance of “the Negro church” as a civic institution in African American life more generally. The preacher is the paradigmatic figure for black leaders; the music offers a glimpse into the blues-soaked soul of a people—it is their plaintive cry under the storm and stress of American life. The frenzy (the shouting), for Du Bois, captures that delicate balance between joy and terror that shadows black life in the United States. It is the eruption of the spirit in ordinary time that assures the presence of God amid the absurdity of white supremacy.

All three features are powerfully expressed in what Du Bois called “the Negro church.” This institution stood at the epicenter of black life. Voluntary associations that addressed the social and economic needs of the community formed within its walls. Church buildings provided the physical space for the education of children. They also offered space for political debate and organizing. Here one acquired a sense of the religious worldview of a captured people, for “the Negro church,” under the brutal weight of slavery and Jim Crow, gave its members and its community languages to imagine themselves apart from the dehumanizing practices of white supremacy. One hears this in the plaintive sound of slave spirituals:

Canaan land is the land for me,

And let God's saints come in.

There was a wicked man,

He kept them children in Egypt land.

Canaan land is the land for me,

And let God's saints come in.

Or, in the moving words of modern gospel music:

I don't feel no ways tired,

I've come too far from where I started from.

Nobody told me that the road would be easy,

I don't believe He brought me this far to leave me.

Each song envisions the possibility of a brighter future predicated on an abiding faith in God, an insight gained in communion and worship with others.

But to think of the preacher, the music, and the frenzy or, more generally, "the Negro or black church," as definitive of *all* of African American religious life denies the religious differences and complexity within black communities. Not all African Americans are Christian nor are they specifically Protestant. American soil has always been and remains fertile ground for a plurality of religious views and practices. Black religious life is no different. Black Christians, Muslims, Jews, practitioners of conjure, voodoo, Yoruba, or other traditional African religions all flourish in black communities throughout the United States. Of course, black Protestantism remains dominant: 83 percent of African Americans self-identify as Christian, and of that number 78 percent are Protestant (only 5 percent are Roman Catholic). But, we must recognize the differences even within black Protestantism (different black denominational histories, Pentecostalism, non-denominationalism). If we are to fully understand African American religious life in the United States, we must also take into account the 12 percent who identify as Christian but are unaffiliated with any particular group.

A subtle distinction must be made here. *African American* religious life consists in all the varied religious practices that occur within black communities. Those practices range from people who attend traditional mainline black churches (like African Methodist Episcopal churches and black Baptist churches), and charismatic churches to those who are Muslim to African Americans who practice Buddhism—just to name a few. Scholars offer sociological accounts of these different groupings. Theologians explain the various doctrines of some of them, and religious historians tell us how they came into existence. But it would be a mistake to say that all these different groups are examples of African American religion. African American religion, in my view, sets apart something more specific.

A pragmatic approach to African American religion

What is African American religion? An informative body of literature has been written about the difficulties in the study of religion generally. Many of the concerns evidenced in these conversations (debates about whether religion is reducible to some other more fundamental notion) are interestingly complicated when we think about religion in tandem with race. Or, more specifically, the issue becomes even messier when the modifier “black” or “African American” describes religion. These adjectives bear the unusual burden of a difficult history that colors the way religion is practiced and understood in the United States. They register the horror of slavery and the terror of Jim Crow as well as the richly textured experiences of a captured people, for whom sorrow stands alongside joy. It is in this context, one characterized by the ever-present need to account for one’s presence in the world in the face of white supremacy, that African American religion takes on such significance.

African American religious life is not reducible to those wounds. That life contains within it avenues for solace and comfort in God, answers to questions about who we take ourselves to be and about our relation to the mysteries of the universe; moreover, meaning is found, for some, in submission to God, in obedience to creed and dogma, and in ritual practice. Here evil is accounted for. And hope, at least for some, is assured. In short, African American religious life is as rich and as complicated as the religious life of

other groups in the United States, but African American religion emerges in the encounter between faith, in all of its complexity, and white supremacy.

My approach assumes that the political and social context in the United States is a necessary though not sufficient condition of any study of something called African American religion. If the phrase “African American religion” is to have any descriptive usefulness at all, it must signify something *more* than African Americans who are religious. In fact, African Americans practice a number of different religions. There are black people who are Buddhist, Jehovah Witness, Mormon, and Baha’i. But that African Americans practice these traditions does not lead us to describe them as black Buddhism or black Mormonism. African American religion singles out something more substantive than that. This something *more* does not have to be an idea of religion, which stands apart from social and historical forces that impinge on the lives of African Americans. Nor does it refer to a definite kind of experience that is itself religious or a religious consciousness as distinct from other forms of consciousness. My aim here is not to secure the unique status of the category of African American religion “as of its own kind.”

The adjective refers instead to a racial context within which religious meanings have been produced and reproduced (I will defer consideration of how religion has also produced particular racial meanings). The history of slavery and racial discrimination in the United States birthed particular religious formations among African Americans. African Americans converted to Christianity, for example, in the context of slavery. Many left predominantly white denominations to form their own after experiencing racial proscription and in pursuit of a sense of self-determination. Some embraced a distinctive interpretation of Islam to make sense of their condition in the United States. Given that history, we can reasonably and accurately describe certain variants of Christianity and Islam as African American and mean something beyond the rather uninteresting claim that black individuals belong to these different religious traditions.

Of course, African American religious practices can be understood apart from the social and political context that, in some ways, called them into being. And there are numerous studies that do just

that. Attention to context, however, helps to explain why the scholar has called the particular religious formation “African American religion.” In other words, African American religion is the invention of scholars who, with particular aims and purposes, seek to describe, analyze, and theorize the religious practices of African Americans under a particular racial regime.

The words “black” or “African American” work as markers of difference: as a way of signifying a tradition of struggle against white supremacist practices and a cultural repertoire that reflects that unique journey as evidenced in religious meanings produced under certain conditions. The phrase calls up a particular history and culture in our efforts to understand the religious practices of a particular people. When I use the phrase “African American religion” then, I am not referring to something that can be defined substantively apart from the thicket of varied practices; rather, my aim is to orient you in a particular way to the material under consideration, to call attention to a sociopolitical history that informs the topic at hand, and to single out the workings of the human imagination and spirit under particular conditions.

Sentences that begin, “African American religion is . . .” are rarely simply descriptive. They typically convey certain normative assumptions about what that religion is, has been, and ought to be, like “African American religion is prophetic” or “African American religion is emotional.” But to understand the sentence “African American religion is . . .” only in this way risks the problem of reifying a particular understanding of black religious practices (of denying complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction by snatching varied practices out of the messiness of history). It is much better to understand such utterances as a *procedure of differentiation and invocation*: as a way of saying that you ought to give more attention to *this* as opposed to *that*, and a recollection of history that makes that distinction worthwhile.

When Howard Thurman, the great twentieth-century black theologian, declared that the slave dared to redeem the religion profaned in his midst, he offered a particular understanding of black Christianity: this expression of Christianity was not the idolatrous embrace of Christian doctrine that justified the superiority of white people and the subordination of black people. Instead, black Christianity

embraced the liberating power of Jesus's example: his sense that all, no matter their station in life, were children of God. Thurman sought to orient the reader to a specific inflection of Christianity in the hands of those who lived as slaves. For him and for me, that difference made a difference. We need only listen to the spirituals, give attention to the way African Americans interpreted the Gospel, and to how they invoked Jesus in their lives. This approach brings into view the particular circumstances that cast Christianity in *this* way as opposed to *that*.

We can also think about this in terms of the negative sentence "This isn't African American religion," or the more familiar claim "This isn't 'black church.'" Such sentences say more about the commitments of the person who utters them than about actual religious practices. What is being noted here is the absence of some *thing*, that some essential element of what constitutes African American Christianity is missing. If we think pragmatically, such utterances point us in a particular direction in relation to the practices under consideration. They call our attention to the absence of cultural markers that have historically attached themselves to African Americans (a certain style of worship for example) or the failure to make explicit connections to African American life or to the politics of the person who utters the claim. So, these sentences also do the work of differentiation and invocation. They draw attention to what makes us "us" as opposed to "them," and that distinction involves attention to "this" as opposed to "that." What should be of interest is not the matter of essential ideas of "us" and "them," but rather the content of "this" and "that" and how that content changes our understanding of the object under consideration.

We cannot deny that African American religious life has developed, for much of its history, under captured conditions. The esteemed historian of religion, Charles Long, is right to insist on the centrality of the importance of what he calls "the involuntary presence of the black community in America" as a distinctive methodological concern for African American religion. Slaves had to forge lives amid the brutal reality of their condition and imagine possibilities beyond their status as slaves. Religion offered a powerful resource in their efforts. They imagined possibilities beyond anything their circumstances suggested. As

religious bricoleurs, they created, as did their children and children's children, on the level of religious consciousness, and that creativity gave African American religion its distinctive hue and timber.

African Americans drew on the cultural knowledge, however fleeting, of their African past. They selected what they found compelling and rejected what they found unacceptable in the traditions of white slaveholders. In some cases, they reached for traditions outside of the United States altogether. They took the bits and pieces of their complicated lives, the received knowledge and the newly experienced insight, and created distinctive expressions of the general order of existence that anchored their efforts to live amid the pressing nastiness of life. They created what scholars call African American religion.

Any study of African American religion must begin with the claim that the particular and dynamic circumstances of African American life constituted the soil for black religious imaginings. Those imaginings ranged from belief in God and his active role in history (that is, a distinctive theological voice) to an insistence that all is not settled, which provided the opening for imaginative leaps beyond the immediate horrors of life. One can witness and hear the distinctiveness of African Americans in the sermonic style of black preaching in churches or in the temples/mosques of the Nation of Islam or in the glorious sounds of black religious music and in worship services throughout the United States. This cultural imprint gives African American religion its unique quality. I am not denying here the importance of African Americans in predominantly white denominations (about 15 percent of African Americans are members of evangelical denominations like the Assemblies of God, and 4 percent are in mainline denominations like the Disciples of Christ) or any of the varied expressions of black religiosity in American life. There is simply a difference between the religions African Americans practice and African American religion. That difference resides in the way history, social, and political context inform and shape the very substance of religious expression.

Three key ideas organize my approach. First, I view African American religion as a *practice of freedom*. Here black religious imagination is used in the service of opening up spaces closed down by white

supremacy. The political nature of that opening varies. It is not necessarily progressive or conservative. Rather, religion becomes the site for self-creation and for communal advancement with political implication. This view requires situating African American religion within the broader dynamic of African American history. Second, I understand African American religion as *sign of difference*. The phrase differentiates particular religious practices from others by reference to specific historical and social contexts that give them shape. African American religion explicitly rejects, as best as possible, the idolatry of white supremacy by proclaiming itself, in practice, as different. And, third, my approach to African American religion insists on its *open-ended orientation*. African American religion offers resources for African Americans to imagine themselves beyond the constraints of now. This belief that “all is not settled,” rooted in God’s grace and the evidence of history, enables broad leaps of faith that deepen aspirational claims for freedom.

Taken together, these three elements help us navigate the complex religious history of African Americans in the United States. They also anchor the kinds of stories we write that say something specific about what it might mean to be black and to hold religious views in a country that is simultaneously democratic, predominantly Christian, and racist. In this sense, the phrase “African American religion” turns our attention to this wonderfully human response to the ordeal of living.

CONCLUSION

To be sure, African Americans are generally more religious than other groups in the United States. In a 2009 Pew Foundation study, 87 percent of African Americans described themselves as belonging to some religious group; 79 percent reported that religion is very important to the way they live their lives. Even among those black folk who reported no religious affiliation, 72 percent reported that religion plays a somewhat important role in their lives, and nearly half (46 percent) said that religion is very important. African Americans pray more than most Americans. Nine out of ten (88 percent) believe with absolute certainty that God exists, and 83 percent believe in angels and demons. So, by most measures, the Pew

study reported, “African Americans stand out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation.”

Eighty-three percent of African Americans are Christian. But this is a decidedly Protestant affair as 78 percent of African Americans report affiliation with some form of Protestantism, with the majority of African Americans (59 percent) belonging to a historically black church. Only 5 percent are Roman Catholic and 1 percent is Muslim. What can be readily seen here is that religion, and particularly Protestant Christianity, continues to animate much of African American life. And this is especially true for African American women—even as they continue to struggle with sexism within black churches. More than 84 percent of African American women say that religion is a very important component of their daily lives; 59 percent report that they attend church at least once a week. No other group of men and women exhibit comparable levels of religious observance. What Nannie Burroughs proclaimed in 1915 still holds today: “The Negro Church means the Negro woman.”

But African American religion, as I have suggested, is much more than a description of how deeply religious African Americans are. The phrase helps us differentiate a particular set of religious practices from others that are invested in whiteness; it invokes a particular cultural inheritance that marks the unique journey of African Americans in the United States. African American religion says to those who will listen “pay attention to *this* as opposed to *that*”—and the distinction is rooted in the sociopolitical realities that shape the experiences of black people in this country.

None of this is static or fixed. Material conditions shift. Old ideologies die. New ones emerge. In some ways, the African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier was right. He noted in his 1963 classic work, *The Negro Church in America*, that demographic shifts, dramatic changes in labor patterns, and class stratification within African American communities would change the role and function of black churches. The same holds today for how we understand African American religion.

Dramatic changes in the nature of work, demographic shifts that involve increased ethnic diversity within black communities, and deepening class stratification have greatly affected the ways we describe African American religion today. Many proponents of prosperity gospel preach primarily to middle-class congregations in megachurches far removed from resource-deprived neighborhoods. The idea of the “black church” has been complicated as immigration from the African continent and the Caribbean transformed certain urban *religiocapes*, connecting them to broad circuits of diasporic exchange. Nigerian Pentecostals stand alongside Haitian Catholics and Jamaican Anglicans with each insisting on the importance of their cultural inheritance in expressing their religious identities. To describe all of this as “black church” or as “African American Christianity” let alone as examples of African American religion extends the terms beyond recognition. Combined with the prevalence of the ideology of color blindness, the idea of African American religion becomes all the more ambiguous and unclear. And, perhaps, rightly so.

African American religion takes us to particular practices under specific conditions. As conditions shift and change, words and phrases that were once helpful in orienting us to certain practices often fall out of use, and new ones emerge as better descriptions. This is not to suggest that the distinctiveness of African American religious life has been lost. I still imagine a child somewhere in the United States is experiencing, like I did in that small church house on the coast of Mississippi, the fullness of African American religious life and the wonder of its theater. But the fear of loss all too often motivates us to hang on to outmoded descriptions.

How we talk about African American religion, how we account for the myriad ways in which a diverse, racialized group gives expression to their religious beliefs within institutions that constitute a kind of cultural inheritance requires a different language, especially when we are confronting something as wildly new as *The Preachers of L.A.*, a reality television about celebrity preachers. Something has changed. Maybe this is what E. Franklin Frazier was reaching for. The issue in his much-maligned view was not so much that institutions and cultural languages created under one set of conditions faded from view as African

Americans were more fully integrated into American society. Instead, new languages would have to emerge to describe and account for black religious experiences under the shifting conditions of late capitalism and the evolving status of race in the United States.

African American religious life remains a powerful site for creative imaginings in a world still organized by race. Churches, mosques, communions of all kinds offer African Americans who participate in them languages and identities that speak back to their conditions of living. What is required is a thick description of what is going on in the religious life of this diverse and complicated community. And if the category of African American religion helps us in doing that work, then it remains useful. If it does not, if the category blocks the way to a fuller understanding of religion and race in the United States because it is an outmoded description, then it is time we got rid of it.