Summary and Keywords

Beginning with trans-Atlantic slavery, which forced hundreds of thousands of people into what is presently the United States, religion among African Americans consistently featured a complex of efforts toward innovation, preservation, and agential intervention rooted in efforts toward survival against structures of racial domination. Social factors including slavery, black responses to a range of political conflicts, influences of immigration, and the varieties of genealogies that have constituted religious formations among African Americans contributed to the creation of formal Christian denominations, intentional communities of Orisha, and transnational movements of Islam. Also important are the insurgent challenges that African Americans have proffered as a rejoinder to social oppression. But this progressive tendency has been paralleled by sharply conservative religious formations that check any easy generalization of African American religions as being predisposed toward social justice movements. Also important are social sources of autonomous church formation, the role of Black Nationalism, anticolonial forms of religion, and Yoruba revivalism of the mid-20th century.

Keywords: race, social justice, slavery, colonialism, immigration, Orisha devotion, black Catholicism, black Protestantism, African American Islam
African Americans and Religion

This article examines major themes in the history of African American religions. The religious systems that have emerged among African Americans have taken shape over several centuries. Their religions were deeply shaped by multiple social forces and institutions ranging from indigenous African religions, slavery, empire, missionary Christianity, commercialism, and the formation of racial blackness that emerged throughout Atlantic geographies beginning in the 15th century.

Blacks repeatedly participated in religious networks across multiple regions as a means of securing freedom, pursuing commercial opportunities, joining missionary ventures, or often reuniting with family members. Beyond their own agency, moreover, a range of social and particularly secular factors have shaped the formation of African American religions across multiple periods. These have included the violent creation of the United States of America in the 1770s as a white republic; the Haitian Revolution as the first black republic; the shifting alignment of Western empires (chiefly Britain, France, and Spain) controlling North America and West Africa; the conduct and eventual abolition of chattel slavery and the trans-Atlantic trade; and the 19th- and 20th-century civil rights movements devoted to establishing multiracial democracy.

Black Religion and Early America

The earliest forms of African American religions were Orisha devotion, Islam, and Christianity. In addition, although no precise statistics are available, a significant number of Africans who joined American Indian nations or lived in proximity to them were grounded in the religious systems of those respective indigenous polities. The African slave trade was the chief means by which most Africans arrived in the Americas. Over twelve million Africans were abducted and forced into slavery in the Americas. Of these, approximately 20 percent were Muslims. A significant minority were also Christians, hailing from the Kongo Kingdom in West Central Africa, which adopted Catholicism as its official cult in the early 1500s. Otherwise, the vast majority were devotees of the varieties of extraordinary beings emblematic of Orisha-type religions indigenous to Africa.
**Orisha Devotion**

Religions of Orisha devotion would become known under a variety of names in the Americas—Vodun, Yoruba, Obeah, Santería, Ochoa, Kumina, and Candomblé are examples. European Christians invented a derisive grammar of “fetishism” to describe Orisha devotion. The fetish discourse, in fact, became an elaborate cultural grammar that served for hundreds of years as a Western racial theory of religion, aesthetics, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and material culture. Existing alongside the academic fetish discourse was a more populist invective developed by Christian missionaries. They tended to explain Orisha devotion as a diabolical religion. Missionary Christianity asserted that Africans worshiped the arch-villain of Christian mythology known as Satan or the Devil. Religions of Orisha devotion, more generally, were also derided as the most base form of idolatry—the worship of sticks and stones—and the lowest on a totem pole of so-called heathen religions.¹

Africans themselves, of course, rooted their practice of Orisha devotion not in the racial derision of European Christianity and its Cartesian orthodoxies but in a philosophy of matter and a theology of power that viewed the material world as either inhabited by or manifestations of powerful beings (Orisha). Africans attributed to these Orisha the making of the material and phenomenal world, rhythms and flows of the biosphere, and the intersubjective capacity to become mutually obligated to humans through rituals of exchange and devotion (such as sacrifice, loyalty oaths, and initiation). In these ways, Africans who practiced Orisha devotion paralleled many Christian devotional exercises. The cosmology of Orisha religion, moreover, was not wholly unlike that of Christianity. For instance, Christians recognized a creator-god, a divine sovereign (Jesus), numerous saints who could be petitioned for assistance, and a host of angels who populated divine and earthly realms to wage battle against minions of Satan.²

Despite these important parallels, Orisha devotion was distinguished from Christianity by at least two major factors. First, it was not rooted in the ideology of monotheism; rather, a principle of communotheism structured the theological norms. Second, Orisha devotion was not wed to any salvation myth in the sense entertained by biblical religions. Christianity invested in an essential claim to rescue the souls of devotees from eternal punishment while servicing myriad temporal concerns such as healing, prosperity, and the legitimacy of state power. Orisha devotion, by contrast, did not proffer a redemption myth to justify saving a soul. Instead, it provided devotees with access to spiritual power to address temporal concerns. In fact, because Orisha devotion was not a purist paradigm, devotees were generally open to other systems of spiritual technology that abetted their aims.³

The American expression of African-derived Orisha devotion manifested through important varieties of religious systems during slavery. In the Lowcountry of the 1700s and 1800s, the ritual and theological dimensions of Kongolese devotion to *minkisi* (singular: *nkisi*)—powerful, Orisha-type beings—became the basis for an enduring
Islam

The Muslim presence throughout the Americas dates back to the 1400s, when Spanish colonizers forced Muslim and non-Muslim Africans into slavery. A number of free African Muslims also participated in the conquest of the Americas or were active as commercial agents. The enslavement of African women, men, and children, however, continually served as the primary means whereby the Muslim population of North America expanded up to the 19th century. As early as the 800s, Islam became a significance presence south of the Sarah regions, gradually spreading from the Sudan region westward throughout the nations of West and West-Central Africa. By the time of the trans-Atlantic trade in African slaves, regions such as the Senegambia featured at least substantial and at times majority populations of Muslims. Moreover, because warfare increasingly became the chief means of forcing Africans into trans-Atlantic slavery, military victories by non-Muslims over Muslims translated into elevated numbers of Muslims among the enslaved people taken to the Americas. Given the widespread presence of Islam among the various regions from which Africans were forced into slavery, it should come as no surprise that Muslims were dispersed throughout North America, including the Northeast and the Chesapeake region (due to English slave trading), and Louisiana (as a consequence of French colonialism). Throughout the antebellum period in the United States, however, the demographic center of African American Muslims was the Southeast, particularly along the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia, inclusive of the Sea Islands. Over the lone duration of slavery, black Muslims intentionally maintained fidelity to their traditional religious heritage. This encompassed praying three times each day, observing Friday as a special day of prayer, maintaining Muslim culinary patterns such as sweetened rice dishes, and adhering to Muslim naming practices such as Samba (meaning “second son” in Hausa and Fulbe), Mustapha, or Bilali. In this context, Muslims families not only reinforced the continuity of their religion but also influenced the religious practices of non-Muslim blacks, possibly leading to conversions to Islam.5

Bills seeking runaway slaves, ledgers of slaveholders, and public requests for “ideal” Africans to be purchased as slaves are among the myriad documentary sources that demonstrate the complex and robust presence of Muslims enslaved in the United States. For multiple reasons, whites typically sought to distinguish African Muslims from those who were not Muslims by claiming they were from “Arabia,” suggesting their somatic features were not those of authentic blacks, or even claiming that their comportment was discernible from that of most blacks. This was partly due to the fact that African Muslims
themselves tended to emphasize their religious difference from non-Muslims. But it also resulted from the mixed agendas of whites who often associated Africa with a lack of organized religion or literacy.\(^6\)

Islam among enslaved blacks, without question was vibrant, intentional, and enduring. But Muslims living within the context of slavery were not unfettered by substantial challenges. By the 1830s, slaveholders in the United States responded to slave rebellions by significantly enhancing the use of religion for social control, and this threatened the continuity of Islam. More aggressive efforts to convert blacks to Christianity also undermined the continuity of the Islamic tradition among enslaved Africans. Nevertheless, it was during the last decades of slavery in the United States that some Muslims gained renown. Among them was Omar Ibn Said, a highly educated Muslim who seems to have feigned conversion to Christianity in the United States. Ibn Said was enslaved in Charleston in 1807 and by the 1820s was widely known for writing Arabic prayers for Christian voyeurs. Even more striking is the history of Bilali and Salih Bilali, two enslaved black men who led a community of Muslims on the Georgia Sea Islands. These two were fluent in spoken and written Arabic, wore Islamic clothing (including a fez), used a prayer mat, bequeathed to their offspring Muslim names, and appear to have led a veritable community of Muslims in the region. One white Georgian recalled described meeting Bilali in the 1850s and remarked on his ability to speak Arabic and his distinctive clothing.\(^7\)
Christianity

Christianity was the earliest and dominant form of African American Christianity. This was partly due to the Kongo adoption of the religion. The most important factor, however, was the Iberian creation of the viceroyalty of New Spain in North America, where numerous Africans were forced into slavery. Iberia remained a major seat of Catholicism and instituted compulsory Christianization of blacks. Within New Spain, Africans outnumbered Europeans in the 1500s and 1600s—more than 36,000 blacks were in colonial Mexico by 1570. By the mid-1600s, over 150,000 blacks were living there. Many of these, however, were born in New Spain. Roughly one-fourth were enslaved, so the majority lived as free persons. As did other blacks throughout the Americas, however, African descended peoples in New Spain faced an elaborate system of racism controlled by white Europeans who dominated and enslaved American Indians while relegating blacks to the lowest rung of racial hierarchy. Africans of New Spain were compelled to convert to Catholicism largely because the Inquisition was administered there. But this Mexican Inquisition was administered by the Spanish monarch instead of church officials. It was thus a royal and not an ecclesiastical institution. The political ideology of royal absolutism guided the monarch’s rule, moreover, and this produced somewhat surprising consequences. Africans, whether free or enslaved, were strongly expected to enter into monogamous heterosexual marriage as proper Christians and to fulfill conjugal obligations, for instance, as an effort to fortify a totalizing Christian governance. This created a Christian obligation to form spousal kinship. Within the context of chattel slavery, this obligation functioned as a right or entitlement to have a family that was recognized by the state, a privilege against which even slave masters were formally unable to prevail.

Black confraternities (cofradías) were also common among black Catholics throughout New Spain at least as early as the 16th century. Free and enslaved blacks maintained these voluntary societies of pietism to structure formal communities of faith. These were essential mechanisms of institutional support in a context where blacks were forbidden to join white monasteries or convents. Common activities included public processions on days devoted to venerating saints. Members of black cofradías also provided financial support to one another, since the vast majority who were free lived in extreme poverty.

In the vicinity of St. Augustine, Florida, North America’s oldest colonial city, Africans sought refuge from British slavery in exchange for devotion to Catholicism and military service to the Spanish crown. By the early 1700s, African Catholics operated a small garrison town known as Fort Mosé. It served as the base for ongoing military reprisals designed to liberate hundreds of black families forced into slavery on British plantations in the Lowcountry of the Carolina colony and the region of present-day Georgia. As the home of a black Catholic army devoted to manumitting Africans from British slavery, Fort Mosé is a striking example of the complex forms and meanings that black religion assumed in the context of slavery and colonialism.
Independent Black Churches

British settler colonialism eventually led to the growth of Protestantism among blacks in North America. Between the 1790s and 1820, thousands of free Africans throughout the North organized independent congregations. Around the same time that the Anglo-American colonies were rebelling against the British crown, free and enslaved Africans in the North were organizing through networks of mutual aid. Among the best known was the Free African Society of Philadelphia. By the 1780s, this society, organized chiefly by free-born and manumitted Africans, had become involved with Quaker theology and Methodism.

Methodism was distinguished by its expansive presence throughout the Atlantic. Because this sect emerged in the 18th century, it benefited from a strategic array of metropoles and transportation networks. Of equal importance was revivalism. This consisted of a series of religious meetings devoted to cultivating a sense of moral deprivation and grave remorse among those who attended. This revivalism began as an effort to persuade European Christians (those who had grown up in the Christian tradition) that the ease of their familiarity would not earn them redemption from eternal condemnation by a divine sovereign.

Eventually in 1816, one group of these African Americans organized themselves into a separate denomination known as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Richard Allen, a young mentee of the British bishop Francis Asbury, became the first bishop of the new ecclesiastical sect. Allen had been forced into slavery since childhood and eventually purchased his freedom as an adult. Throughout those years, he was drawn to Methodist revivalism. Not all African Methodists were persuaded that following the Philadelphia group was the only way to proceed. By 1821, a second group of African Methodists organized themselves as the African Methodists Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) Church. James Varrick became the denomination’s first bishop. It continued to thrive but with fewer members than the AME denomination.12

Both the AME and AME Zion denominations exhibited an explicit, ideological adherence to Methodism as a matter of great importance. The uncomplicated emphasis on affective (emotional) conversion experience, the relatively concise doctrinal formulas, and the emphasis of the Methodists on opposing slavery were all essential to their devotion to Methodism. Of all these elements, the Methodist opposition to slavery was a very important means of promoting growth and expansion among potential black converts. Until the 1870s, these two denominations constituted the most important early forms of independent black ecclesiastical bodies comprising multiple congregations in the United States.13

There were other congregations of predominantly African constituency in the United States, however, that operated with a relative degree of autonomy. Among these were the African Baptist Church of Silver Bluff, South Carolina (1775); the Black Baptist Church of
African Americans and Religion

Williamsburg, Virginia (1776); the Harrison Street Church of Petersburg, Virginia (1776); the First African Church of Savannah, Georgia (1779); and the Joy Street African Baptist Church of Boston (1805). Of special importance was the First African Church of Savannah, Georgia. This congregation emerged during the British occupation of that region. This created favorable circumstance for enslaved Africans, because many gained manumission by fighting for the British crown to suppress the Anglo-American rebellion. Because all African congregations required the agency and administration of free (including manumitted) blacks, the British occupation appears to be the singular reason that the Savannah church emerged and thrived during this time.¹⁴

Also notable was the Ryland or Old African Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia. Peter Randolph, who was emancipated in 1847, served as the church’s chief minister. The Savannah congregation also gained renown for its founder, George Liele, who became the first African to be officially ordained as a Baptist minister in North America. He was born in Virginia in 1752 and was enslaved from infancy and removed to Georgia. Liele was baptized by a white Baptist minister and spent years preaching on plantations in the vicinity of Georgia’s Brooke County. The irruption of the Revolutionary War created the conditions for his manumission and his founding of the local congregation of African converts. When the British military left Savannah for Jamaica, Liele cast his lot with them, and he continued his missionary aims in the Caribbean, founding black congregations that soon created a permanent foothold among free and enslaved Africans.¹⁵

What led to the creation of these independent denominations? Most important was the escalating scale of anti-black racism that white parishioners meted out to the African members of the predominantly white congregations. White missionaries sought to persuade blacks that Christianity was a religion for all peoples. And they eagerly sought to include blacks as dues-paying members. And yet, as the number of blacks increased at these churches, whites imposed segregated seating to force blacks to sit in elevated galleries (relegated to be out of sight) of white parishioners or in the rear section of meeting houses. More importantly, the governance of ostensibly mixed-race congregations was limited to chiefly white members. So, black parishioners routinely found themselves providing financial support to congregations that excluded them from voting and from positions of leadership. Even congregational prayers, during which parishioners assembled at the church altar, became an opportunity to exclude blacks as white-controlled congregations began to prohibit the physical presence of blacks at the altar to mollify the disdain that white Christians expressed. Autonomous black congregations and denominations thus served to remedy the anti-black racism that defined white-controlled congregations. This means that unlike most church sects, black independent churches were rooted in efforts to resolve racial conflicts rather than theological divides.¹⁶
Black Christianization

Although Christianization was limited to only a small minority of Africans in the United States before the Civil War—it was disproportionately widespread among free Africans but relatively uncommon among the majority of enslaved Africans—the rate of Christianization increased sharply as a consequence of the evangelical methods of Baptists and Methodists. The central mechanism of this expansion, moreover, was the missionary strategy of cultivating extreme forms of religious hatred that inspired black Christians and their white missionary allies to attempt exterminating every vestige of indigenous African religion in the United States and throughout Africa. But other factors also contributed to the relative success of Baptists and Methodists. First, white evangelicals won an audience with blacks because they eagerly invited them to convert and join their churches while condemning slavery. Some white churches even excommunicated slaveholders. Second, Methodists and Baptists promoted a version of Christianity that was easily accessible to potential converts who lacked formal education or who were untutored in the learned traditions of Christian theology. And third, a steady increase in the number of black preachers richly galvanized efforts to spread Christianity among unchurched blacks. One should observe that white abolitionists, as a rule, were not antiracists. And it would be counterfactual to suggest that the anti-slavery activism among white Christians opposed white supremacism and the fundamental architecture of the United States as a racial settler state. Nevertheless, the growing populism of evangelical religion, white missionaries efforts to gain African converts, and the expanding number of black ministers and missionaries generated a lasting Christianization among free Africans in the post-Revolutionary War era.¹⁷

In a context defined by formal patriarchal patterns of authority and control, it is significant to consider that a number of black women rose to prominence in African American Christianity. Among them was Jarena Lee, a free black convert to Methodism. Lee embraced the growing emphasis on holiness and spirit-possession within Methodism; this paradigm privileged direct inspiration of the individual communicant. After Lee insisted that the Christian deity had called her to become a preacher, she persuaded her mentor Richard Allen to abandon his initial opposition to her aspirations. Allen continued to support Lee’s ministry, and she soon established a robust schedule of itinerant preaching. Lee’s experience was by no means an isolated phenomenon. Maria Miller Stewart was another member of the African Methodist Episcopal church who pursued a public preaching and speaking ministry. Born in Connecticut in 1803, Miller became the first American women to pursue a public speaking career (not counting the public preaching of women such as Jarena Lee). She gave her first lecture in Boston’s Franklin Hall in 1832. Stewart advocated for a feminist conception of social power, and she emphasized an African-centered understanding of history, rejecting racist claims that historical agency was the exclusive reserve of white Europeans.¹⁸
African American Religion and Slavery

Throughout the antebellum period, African Americans generated elaborate and sustained responses to slavery. Unlike the majority of whites who defended the benefits of slavery and who overwhelmingly identified with the institution, African Americans were uniformly opposed to racial slavery and did not need to be convinced of the humanity of black people or the intolerable, destructive nature of chattel slavery. The fact that the institution functioned as a system of sexual violence, moreover, also garnered religious and theological responses from blacks. Harriet Jacobs (1813–1897), who wrote under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, endured years of sexual abuse and violation from James Norcom, the white doctor who enslaved her and her family. Her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861, detailed the sexual trauma that regularly featured in the political economy of slavery. Jacobs publicly showcased what most Americans knew abstractly—black women were routinely forced, even as children, into sexual service or harassment at the whim of those who enslaved them.

Norcom, to whom Jacobs applies the pseudonym “Dr. Flint,” began to target Jacobs for sexual abuse when she was fifteen; he was almost forty years older than she. She describes crumbling under the powerful burden of shame and self-disgust. Part of the violence that Jacobs suffered was related to the moral universe that she inhabited. This was shaped by a Christian notion of purity and patriarchy that overdetermined women’s sexuality. To be a woman and a religious subject meant embodying sexual purity (virginity) until marriage. Neither virginity nor marriage were socially accessible for Jacobs and other enslaved women, however. Instead, they lived under a norm of Christian morality and social control that made moral purity an impossible pursuit. In this setting, it was victimized women rather than the sexual system of slavery that received private and public moral condemnation.19

In a related fashion, the African American minister David Ruggles (1810–1849) scathingly condemned the system of concubinage that defined the mainstream of American slavery. Ruggles charged white women with complicity in the system of slavery. He recognized that the white wives of slaveholders were all too familiar with the sexual economy of the institution, and he challenged them to boycott their churches and contest their husbands over sexual system in which slaveholders forced black women into sexual service, enslaved the offspring, and carried on sexual relations in the very presence of the white wives to whom they had pledged fidelity in holy matrimony.20

The religious consternation over slavery’s sexual regime was only one dimension of African American’s religious engagement with slavery. Even more expansive was the Negro Convention movement that began in the 1830s and continued into the 1860s. This church-based movement involved a series of annual national meetings that enabled black antislavery activists to collaboratively oppose slavery, assist refugees, promote black resettlement for self-determination, lobby white public officials for policy changes, and generate a larger social movement to persuade white Americans to oppose the institution.
Activists such as Maria Stewart, Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Delany were representative of the many leading advocates of abolitionism who emerged from this movement and whose perspective on religion and politics was shaped by it. Perhaps more than any other single factor, this convention movement secularized African American Christianity by channeling the religious agency of free blacks toward addressing the political and social plight of millions of enslaved blacks, their lives hanging in the balance of a slaveholding regime.21

In addition to institutionalizing their antislavery activism, African Americans also developed important theological reforms to reshape the way Americans understood race, religion, and social power. They frequently did so by developing and promoting distinctive interpretations of the Bible. For instance, they adopted the biblical motif of the Exodus, the narrative of ancient Hebrews escaping Egyptian slavery through divine assistance. Black religious activists applied this to the situation of slavery in the United States to assert that slavery was sinful and incompatible with the normative moral universe of Christianity. Proslavery activists had a much easier task of defending the biblical sanction of their cause, given the fact that the Bible’s treatment of slavery represented the interests of patriarchal elites who dominated slaves and women. But that only heightened the urgency of a robust theological assault on slavery.22

Also important was Ethiopianism, a religious ideology that interpreted Psalm 68:31, which referred to princes coming “out of Egypt” and Ethiopia (for which this ideology was named) lifting “her hands” unto the biblical deity. By the 19th century, Ethiopia was commonly used as a racial designation for the black race. Thus, African American interpreters commonly employed this scripture as a prophecy predicting the black race would experience social uplift and mass conversion to Christianity in the present age. This theology was not without irony; Ethiopianism rendered the slave trade as a means of exposing African peoples to Christianity while simultaneously condemning the practice of slavery. Nevertheless, through the religious leadership of African Americans such as Maria Stewart, David Walker, and Alexander Crummell, this theology of prophetic racial uplift became an immensely popular aspect of the larger conflict over slavery.23

Related to this was African Americans’ interpretation of the Noah legend. No biblical legend was more important to proslavery activists than this story, which they interpreted to claim that Noah’s son Ham was the ancestor of blacks and had been cursed with slavery as a divine prophecy. African Americans actually identified with Ham because this character was identified with the grand ancient civilizations of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Babylonia. Such classical civilizations were renowned for developing lasting contributions in the arts, sciences, and statecraft. In this way, African Americans religious interpreters repurposed a racist tradition of justifying slavery in order to assert their humanity and to locate themselves within the history of civilizations that Western nations themselves lauded for cultural and intellectual achievement. At the same time, black interpreters also rejected the claim that Ham’s descendants deserved to be enslaved, arguing instead that
American slavery was a contradiction of divine principles and needed to be ended swiftly and decisively.\textsuperscript{24}
Post–Civil War, Black Religion, and the Nadir

More than 400,000 blacks throughout the South exploited the instability created by the Civil War and rebelled against slavery. They fled to Union lines, overwhelmed refugee camps, and transformed a war meant to preserve the integrity of a white republic into a desperate struggle to end slavery. Such a massive slave rebellion—the largest in modern history—effected a monumental shift in African American religions. A civil rights movement ensued throughout the 1860s and 1870s, bringing an end to formal systems of chattel slavery and paving the way for black citizenship in what had previously been an officially and formally structured white racial state.25

The most visible consequences for African American religions manifested through the growth of new autonomous black denominations such as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (later renamed the Christian Methodist Episcopal) in 1870 and the National Baptist Convention in 1886. Both of these denominations flourished mainly in the South, largely because the vast majority of African Americans had been enslaved in the southern regions of the United States. By 1895, the National Baptist Convention would exceed three million members, well above one-third of the nation’s eight million blacks. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination, meanwhile, benefited from rapid growth as the independent sect drew on its decades of organizational experience to plant new churches among black Christians previously affiliated with white denominations and to missionize among the millions of blacks whose former slaveholders had typically prevented missionaries from proselytizing them. It had previously been limited largely to free Africans, who were most populous in the North. The abolition of chattel slavery, thus, immediately created a major source of prospective new members of the denomination. By 1880, the AME denomination’s membership swelled to 400,000. It would remain the second largest independent black denomination.26

Some religious trends encouraged significant interaction across racial boundaries while simultaneously engendering autonomous black church. The holiness movement is a key example. It was rooted in Methodist teachings of perfectionism, which advanced that converts who exerted the requisite discipline (elaborate fasting and praying) could perfectly align themselves with divine will. This soon grew into its own religious movement and found a ready sect audience among African American Christians impressed by teachings of being baptized with not only water but also special spiritual abilities. Among those interested was a southern minister from Mississippi, Charles Mason. This energetic Baptist preacher was increasingly persuaded that the true form of Christianity lay in the fire-baptized holiness movement. Mason was especially impressed with the central role of fasting and praying and a sharp rejection of “worldliness”—typically associated with secular music, and using tobacco and alcohol. By 1895, he started a new denomination that he named the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), based on a phrase from the New Testament. Since he had grown disillusioned with Christian sectarianism, it was important to him that no “worldly” name grace the new church movement. When the
Azusa Street Revival emerged in southern California in 1903, it caught his attention. The historic revival ran continuously for almost five years. Mason attended the event and returned to Mississippi with the spiritual gift of glossolalia as evidence of his sanctification. He partnered with other similar-minded ministers, and under his leadership COGIC became the nation’s largest black Pentecostal denomination.

Among the other pivotal developments that shaped African American religions in the late 19th century was the club movement among black women. Club movements began as voluntary organizations among women of relative means. Women gathered to discuss diverse topics including literature, prominent public issues such as suffrage or race, and local activism concerning temperance and education. White women, however, excluded African Americans from their clubs. As a result, African Americans formed their own clubs. This was decidedly ironic because women’s clubs began as a response to white men’s clubs excluding white women.27

As with the independent church movement among African Americans, the club movement among black women produced an institutional independence and progressivism that proved vital to black social agency. Black women’s clubs were formally secular. But like most secular movements of the time, they drew on a range of grammars and structures, and religion was consistently a prominent dimension. In 1896, African American women formed a national body—the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Mary Terrell (1863–1954), a professional educator and journalist with a graduate degree from Oberlin College, served as the chief executive. In a fashion similar to the Negro Convention movement, the NACW employed a public theology that promoted a view of divine destiny for black well-being. Members also affirmed the human dignity of blacks in the face of misogyny, anti-black terrorism, and lynching, and they inveighed that state racism and the myriad other forms of anti-blackness constituted a grave evil that would incur divine wrath in the absence of radical change.28

As the formal leadership of black Christian denominations, moreover, privileged the exclusive leadership of men, black women created independent organizations such as the National Baptist Women’s Convention, which became the chief fundraising arm of its parent denomination, the National Baptist Convention, USA. Black women founded this particularly auxiliary group in 1900 and, within one decade, they had generated the capital and leadership to establish the National Training School for Women and Girls. During a time when prominent white religious groups were immersed in the social settlement movement that emerged around the turn of the century, these African American women exerted pivotal influence in the expression of socially committed forms of organized religion to address urban migration and attending problems of poverty, racism, joblessness, and homelessness.29
Early 20th-Century Religious Trends

Among the prominent, distinctive patterns of the early 20th century was the growth of urbanization. Thousands of people moved from rural landscapes to thriving urban regions such as Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Washington, DC. One major wave of these migrations occurred during the first two decades of the 20th century. In the years following World War II, another burst of migration would occur as African Americans sought renewed opportunities for economic survival and economic advancement. This rapid expansion of urban populations fostered important shifts in black religion. For many migrants originating from the southern states, for instance, the elevated style of liturgy—which marginalized charismatic expression—seemed inappropriate. Black migrants responded frequently by renting space for their own congregations, often resorting to underutilized storefronts. This was especially important for considering the irruption of new religious movements and developments that shaped African American religious life during the period. Among these were New Thought, black theology, and what might be described as religions of black ethnicity—black Judaism and black Islamic sects such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam (NOI).

Black theology is characterized by its critical attention to the politics of racial power and its emphasis on conceptualizing religious agency through accountability to the dire situation of institutional racism. Among the earliest proponents of black theology in the United States was the African Methodist Episcopal bishop Henry McNeal Turner. He was cognizant of the racial aims of white Christianity aesthetics and theology, and he condemned the unyielding efforts of white theologians to defend white state racism and apartheid as consonant with the will of the Christian deity. Turner asserted that blacks had “every right to believe that god is a Negro,” affirming their prerogative to conceptualize the divine in terms of racial blackness. His espousal of black theology found greater elaboration in the writings and speeches of Marcus Garvey, who popularized an “Ethiopian” or negritude theology that encouraged blacks to worship the god of Ethiopia. By this Garvey meant that blacks needed to identify their struggle for political liberation and racial justice with spiritual agency. He urged blacks to reject depictions of a white god and corresponding claims of divine favor for white racism. He also cautioned against race-neutral theology that regarded the Christian deity as too busily occupied with more urgent spiritual matters to be involved with the life-and-death issues of anti-black lynchings, colonialism, and statelessness that plagued millions of blacks throughout the globe.

Garvey was also inspired by the New Thought movement, which emphasized positive thinking and the power of the mind to exert real worldly force to produce personal success and transformation. He had apprenticed with black entrepreneurs since his youth and assumed that black agency and initiative could generate successful results despite adversities and challenges. Overcoming the destruction of anti-blackness, he insisted would require blacks to adopt a new outlook and to reject internalized inferiority.
Through collaboration with his spouse Amy Jaques Garvey, who was an experienced social activist in Jamaica, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was born and grew into a global organization that sustained a grassroots antiracist movement for black self-determination. The Garveys promoted the fundamentals of a vibrant, politically engaged black theology. As a result, millions of blacks worldwide began to reassess the racial implications of conceptualizing divine agency and the linkage between religion and race.\(^{32}\)

It was the African American minister George Baker, however, who produced an even more strident theology of positivity and empowerment to defy racial apartheid. His background included experience with Pentecostalism (he attended the Azusa Street revival). Like the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) minister Charles Mason, Baker’s denominational background was Baptist. But he began preaching a message of racial equality and of establishing heaven on earth. His paradisiacal claims of racial harmony met with police repression—he was forced into a mental asylum due to his preaching. But he eventually became successful and established a large following in New York City. Under the name Father Divine, he claimed to be the incarnation of the divine—god in black flesh—and he established the Peace Mission, attracting thousands of black and white followers. The Peace Mission purchased real estate throughout New York, operated hundreds of businesses, created countless jobs, and regularly provided free meals to thousands of people each week at lavish banquets during the most debilitating years of the Great Depression. Blacks and whites lived openly together in the real estate owned by the Peace Mission, to the chagrin of hostile media and law enforcement.

Islam has been a part of the history of black Americans since the early period of European colonialism in the Americas. Black Muslims from Iberia accompanied Christopher Columbus’s expedition to what is presently the Dominican Republic in the 1490s. Over several centuries, moreover, Spain, Portugal, France, and England transported children and adults from West Africa to multiple regions throughout the Americas. Although it is impossible to know exactly how many enslaved Africans were Muslims, estimates place the proportion at roughly 20 percent. This means that tens of thousands of enslaved blacks were forced into slavery in the region presently designated as the United States.\(^{33}\)

Autonomous, self-sustaining communities of black Muslims first appeared in the United States during the 20th century as a consequence of Muslim missionaries such as the Ahmadiyya and Sunni sects. Prominent individuals such as Satti Majid, a Sunni missionary, played a pivotal role in converting African Americans (typically Christians) to Islam. Majid was born in the Sudan, studied in Cairo’s al-Azhar university, and traveled to New York City in 1904 with the aim of winning converts to Sunni Islam. Over several years, he established the Muslim Unity Society, the Islamic Missionary Society, the Red Crescent Society, the Islamic Benevolent Society, and possibly the Islamic Mission of America.\(^{34}\)
In 1925, a visionary man by the name of Timothy Drew established another group of African American Muslims: the Moorish Science Temple of America. Drew changed his name to Noble Drew Ali, and he preached that blacks in the United States had been separated from their true heritage and identity through a violent history of slavery and colonialism. Central to his message of redemption was the claim that Islam was the original religion of blacks and that their nationality was “Moorish American.” Drew organized the first MSTA group in Chicago. Within just a few years, branches existed in major cities throughout the United States and even in small towns such as Belzoni, Mississippi. Ali died mysteriously shortly after being released from police custody, likely due to brutal treatment. But the MSTA continued to grow under the leadership of others and became a lasting presence in contemporary American Islam.

It was the Lost-Found NOI that became the most well-known group of African American Muslims during the 20th century. Wallace Farrad, a former member of the Moorish Science Temple, established the NOI in Detroit in the 1930s. Farrad echoed the MSTA’s claim that Islam was the true and historical heritage of the black race. And he found his most ambitious and effective convert in a young migrant from Georgia, Elijah Poole. After joining the new religious movement, Poole adopted an Islamic surname: Muhammad. His wife Clara became a pivotal leader. Despite unyielding repression from municipal police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the NOI grew under the leadership of the Muhammads. By the 1950s, the NOI encompassed thousands of followers in dozens of temples throughout the country. The most famous minister of the NOI, Malik Shabazz (Malcolm X), converted to the religion while serving a prison sentence for burglary. Within a few years, Shabazz became the chief minister of the NOI. His energetic charisma and visionary leadership manifested through the establishment of new temples throughout the country as the NOI gained new converts. Shabazz also started a newspaper entitled *Muhammad Speaks*, which provided regular news and commentary about African American life and global politics, while promulgating the teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

**Religion and Political Activism**

Intractable conflicts emerged as Muhammad’s efforts to preserve an apolitical religious movement butted up against a growing desire for activism and social change within the NOI. Gradually, the NOI began to address the turmoil of state racism and the insurgent activism with the civil rights movement. At the same time, however, this religious community began to rupture as the Federal Bureau of Investigation cultivated a strategic alliance with municipal police departments to infiltrate and disrupt the Nation of Islam. In 1955, the Bureau even created a training manual to prepare agents to execute counterintelligence operations against the NOI. Despite the NOI’s efforts to publicly critique institutionalized forms of anti-black racism, the FBI successfully propagandized
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the NOI as a cult of anti-white hatred. For generations, this would continue to function as the public’s general impression of the NOI.

But Islam was not the only domain through which blacks were challenging the structures of anti-black racism. A small group of African American southerners began to organize in the 1950s to challenge myriad forms of legal apartheid, and they organized as a network of Christian churches to pool resources, train protesters, coordinate strategies, and deliver a unified front of resistance to explicit, legalized forms of racism. Among the earliest was a successful bus boycott in Tallahassee, Florida, in which the African Methodist Episcopal minister Charles K. Steele was a prominent organizer. Activists in Montgomery followed, and by 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) emerged to join legacy organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAAC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). SCLC garnered special attention, primarily because its executive director, Martin Luther King Jr., became the public face and leading spokesperson for a mass movement comprising thousands of activists and numerous organizations, most of which predated SCLC.37

Decades later, the civil rights movement enjoyed a reputation as a religious movement exhibiting the authentic legacy of African American Christianity. In historical context, however, it was a radical, extremist movement that represented not the majority sentiment of black churches but an avant-garde coalition asserting a liberationist, social-justice theology as the proper understanding of Christian commitment. In fact, despite its popularity decades later, SCLC was the target of derision and massive condemnation in its own day because it landed a burgeoning black political movement squarely in the middle of a fierce struggle over the public meaning of American Christianity. The movement challenged a black politics of respectability by involving demonstrators in civil disobedience (i.e., defying civil laws), resulting in arrests, incarceration, and the tarnishing of pedestrian credentials with criminal convictions, albeit for a just cause. And as more African American churches embraced social movement activism to pursue racial equality, they butted up against the rising popularity of evangelical fundamentalism.38

Since the early 1900s, fundamentalism had become a vibrant movement to restore Christianity to what many imagined were pristine roots unadulterated by so-called modern dilemmas or political aims. By the 1950s and 1960s, charismatic fundamentalists such as Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell were realizing considerable success in undermining the legitimacy of socially committed Christianity. They preached a strict interpretation of saving spiritual souls, and they impugned civil rights leaders who identified the essence of Christianity with promoting social justice. Mainstream African American churches began to adopt this new fundamentalism, and in 1961, the largest African American Christian denomination, the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., rejected the central strategies and religious rationales of the SCLC. In response, civil rights leaders created the Progressive National Baptist Convention. This new denomination worked harmoniously with the socially committed theology espoused by
ministers such as Martin Luther King Jr. (SCLC’s chief executive) and Gardner Taylor, a major defender of the civil rights movement’s Christian theology.39

No less important for African American religions during this time was the cultural revolution birthed by the Black Consciousness Movement. As an iteration of the larger so-called negritude paradigm, Black Consciousness valorized the aesthetic, historical, and political valences of racial blackness. So, for instance, African Americans asserted that hegemonic social preferences for straightened hair and lighter skin were a product of anti-black racism. Natural hairstyles gradually became valorized. Blacks also began countering the long-standing derision of dark skin as “ugly” or “beastly” by embracing dark skin as beautiful and desirable. The historical presence of civilization—typically conceptualized as racial accomplishments—among black nations of Africa also became important. Ancient Egypt and Ethiopia frequently featured as emblematic of the capacity of blacks for complex forms of institutional learning, engineering, and material cultural production. Wearing African-styled clothing, learning African languages such as Ki-Swahili or Yoruba, and studying African dance and drumming were just a few of the many performative demonstrations that valorized African-derived religions and other forms of culture as human, not diabolical, affirming their worth as cultural reference points for living in the 20th century. Black consciousness was especially marked by the emphasis on the legitimacy of black political empowerment, self-determination, and the global struggle among colonized peoples to establish independent, sovereign states, unfettered by European colonialism.40

This produced significant consequences for black religion. One of special prominence was the black theology movement. By the 1960s, black Christian theologians began openly challenging the Aryanization of Jesus—that is, they critiqued portrayals of Jesus as a white European, most frequently as blonde-haired and blue-eye, and often as an anti-Semite. They also rejected the complicity of mainstream white American Christianity with racial apartheid and the broader phenomenon of anti-black racism. Instead, black theologians emphasized that God was black. By this, they meant that the Christian deity identified with those who were despised and placed on the underside of history. In the context of the 20th-century United States, they emphasized, this meant that the deity identified with racial blackness. They also interpreted the Black Power movement as integral to realizing the authentic message of Christianity, which they asserted was liberation from social suffering and structural injustice. Among these individuals were James H. Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, Joseph Washington, and Kelly Brown Douglass. What emerged as womanist theology wed a critical engagement with the Christian legacy of racist theology to a robust critique of sexism and, eventually, heterosexism. Jacquelyn Grant, Katie Cannon, and Delores Williams were among a growing number of academic theologians who developed an avowedly original theology that was unapologetic in rejecting white theological norms, critiquing patriarchy and racist forms of feminism, and formulating sources and benchmarks in a black racial canon of liberationist activism and an anti-racism intelligentsia. Black and womanist theologians aimed to transform the teachings of black churches throughout the nation, but they met with sharp rejection and a steadily rising theological conservatism among African American ecclesiastical leaders.
The larger impact of this African American theological movement, rather, lay in producing a major shift in the intellectual study of black religion and culture as dozens of African American theologians began incorporating an engaged analysis of race, class, gender, and sexuality into the study of religion.41

Even more striking was the emergence of Yoruba revivalism, among other instances of valorizing African-derived religions. This Yoruba movement had its beginnings in the 1960s in New York City. As thousands of Santería practitioners arrived in Harlem and other regions of the United States following the Cuban Revolution, African Americans were met with a formidable presence of Orisha devotion that nurtured a growing expanse of close-knit communities sponsoring rituals of healing, prayer, sacrifice, and initiation. One group of African Americans eventually formed their own Shango Temple, which evolved into an effort to develop a “pure” form of Yoruba religion that was untainted by the use of Christian saints, the Bible, Christian prayers, and so on. By the 1970s, this group had established Oyotunji African Village, an independent, separate community just miles from Sheldon, South Carolina. The Oyotunji society emphasized its basis in the religious and political structures of pre-colonial Yoruba religion and culture. Residents typically speak Yoruba, wear traditional West African clothing, live under the governance of a theocratic sovereign, and adhere to the cultic and ritual life of Yoruba-style Orisha devotion.42
Post-Civil Rights Era

If the 1950s and 1960s were marked by a struggle between fundamentalism and social gospel Christianity, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the fruits of this conflict as a decisive victory by fundamentalist evangelicalism. This period saw the emergence of the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, Promise Keepers, and myriad other predominantly white groups that staked claims amid so-called culture wars by arming against reproductive rights, gay rights, secularism, the teaching of evolutionary science, and multiculturalism’s challenge to the ideological and racial monolith of Anglo-American Christian nationalism. Asserting that the nation had strayed from its authentic foundation of Christian conservatism, a new generation of Christian evangelicals arose to restore the nation to what many viewed as its past ideals. This fundamentalist iteration of evangelicalism had its roots in the early 20th century. But it came of age, so to speak, in the last decades of the 20th century. In such an environment, the social gospel grew barely recognizable as actual religion in public discourse. By contrast, media pundits regularly identified as “committed,” “faithful” Christians those who asserted a fundamentalist view of Christianity.

Given its historical grounding in missionary religion, which emphasized salvation of a soul while marginalizing a theological engagement with social power, African American Christianity proved a fertile soil for the seeds of this new wave of fundamentalism. It was greatly abetted by the rise of televangelism, which powerfully connected a global audience of viewers and advanced a remarkable consistency in theology among constituents. The West Coast minister Fred Price was among the successful pioneers of African American televangelists in this vein, and like others he drew on Pentecostalism and biblical literalism to promote Bible-centered teaching. Allying with popular white fundamentalists such as Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland, Price developed his own commanding style of Bible-centered teaching while emphasizing acts of faith and trust in biblical promises of prosperity for Bible believers. As a result, Price became a foundational figure in making the prosperity gospel a mainstream movement. His following grew from a few hundred parishioners in the early 1970s to more than ten thousand weekly attendees by 1990. By that time, he established the Fellowship of International Christian Word of Faith Ministries, which was emblematic of a fast-growing movement among African Americans Christians.43

Price helped inspire a new generation of African American Christians who were beginning their own ministries and wedding the innovations of televangelism and massive congregations to an energetic social conservatism anchored in fundamentalist theology. Among these were Leroy Thompson of Darrow, Louisiana; Keith Butler of Southfield, Michigan; and T. D. Jakes of Dallas, Texas. Jakes has enjoyed arguably the greatest renown as a broadcast evangelist in the United States. Aside from these male leaders, a number of African American women commanded a considerable influence in charismatic
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Christianity. Especially notable were Shirley Caesar, whose ministry was rooted in her skill as a vocal musician; Jackie McCullough of Brooklyn, New York; and Cynthia Hale of Decatur, Georgia.44

Among the most important developments to shape African American Christianity in the post–civil rights movement was the growth and popularity of megachurches, which exceed two thousand weekly attendees. The first of these massive congregations seems to have been Olivet Baptist Church of Chicago, Illinois, a black parish that grew to several thousand parishioners during the 1920s. As a cultural phenomenon, however, megachurches began to take hold during the 1980s. Among the significant patterns of megachurches is a distinct rejection of explicit racial consciousness, a significant departure from the legacy tradition of black churches. Contemporary black parishioners emphasize that their churches are centers of spiritual union, not politically or racially committed activism. With important exceptions (such as Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ), these congregations identify social problems like poverty, epidemic illness, and racism as consequences of spiritual and personal failures, not institutional structures of inequality.

The latter part of the 20th century also evidenced the growing diversity of the U.S. population. The immigration quota system formalized under the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which legally discriminated against non-whites to limit their ability to enter the United States, was abolished by the “Hart-Celler” Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. As a result, by the 1980s and 1990s, blacks were immigrating to the United States at ten times the rate decades earlier. Immigration from some Caribbean nations, by the early 2000s, had increased by several hundred-fold. And by 2010, there were over 3.25 million black immigrants in the United States. This significantly reshaped the fabric of African American religious life. Global networks, already a part of the American landscape, were significantly strengthened. In major destination cities such as New York City and Miami, African Independent Churches (AICs) have a footprint in the United States. These include the Celestial Church of Christ, the Deeper Life Bible Church, the Cherubim and Seraphim, and the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Also important is the growing number of congregations—frequently Pentecostal—constituted by black Caribbean immigrants.45

These developments collectively shaped African American Christianity into a profoundly and uniformly conservative formation. In the 21st century, the most prominent and successful African American Christian ministers, as a rule, have espoused sharply conservative theologies. Examples include T. D. Jakes, senior minister of the Potter’s House in Dallas, Texas; Creflo Dollar, founder of the World Changers Church International near Atlanta, Georgia; and Eddie Long, senior minister of Georgia’s New Birth Missionary Baptist Church. In addition to the multimillion-dollar annual revenues of these churches and the high public profile of their leaders (often designated as bishops), these 21st-century black Christian ministers have led their congregations to establish a robust media presence beyond televised broadcast to incorporate an elaborate web presence and the use of social media. These massive churches (Long’s New Birth

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date: 16 December 2018
congregation numbers approximately twenty-five thousand) also operate schools, daycare centers, and local businesses, which in turn generate employment opportunities and stimulation of local economies. No less common is the theological emphasis on material prosperity (the “prosperity gospel”), which has drawn sharp criticism and accusations of predation, since the majority of these black congregations are disproportionately poor, unemployed, criminalized, and socially marginalized. In the 21st century, African American churches have constituted the most Bible-reading demographic in the United States (72 percent versus 47 percent for whites). And 98 percent of all black congregations would report that their parishioners viewed the Bible as an inerrant document. This, in turn, correlates with the fact that virtually all black churches were as biblically conservative (i.e., viewing the Bible as an inerrant book of divine instruction) as the most conservative subset of white Christian churches.46

The long history of African American religions has involved important changes and continuities. While patterns of racialization and imperative for social justice have persisted, political changes, immigration, economic shifts, and myriad other factors have continued to introduce new themes and shifts in the public representation of black religion. Amid these shifts, the salience of religion for understanding African American social life has remained as poignant as in past eras. And the vibrancy and dynamism of these religious formations will by all appearances continue into the future.
Historiography

Scholarship on African American religions has varied tremendously since the earliest studies emerged. Among the first was W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Negro Church* (1903). Du Bois’s research was grounded in sociological methods and fieldwork. He examined the social function of black churches and argued that African American religion was rooted in African-derived religions among enslaved blacks. Du Bois also centered attention on the question of how well black churches engaged with social uplift and reform, which he argued was more urgent than attending to spiritual interests of parishioners. Other studies devoted close attention to black Protestant churches, often with a similar concern about their social mission. Carter G. Woodson’s *Negro Church* (1921) is emblematic and documented the creation of black Protestant denominations. Benjamin May’s *Negro Church* (1933) built on this trend and included important assessments of religious thought. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s *Black Metropolis* (1945) examined the textures of black urban life with generous attention to religion. St. Clair Drake also authored *Churches and Voluntary Association in the Chicago Negro Community* (1940).

Ethnography and research interviews would continue to play an important role in early studies of black religion. In this vein, a small but critical mass of scholars would move beyond studies of denominations to examine cultural systems of religion informed by African-derived religion. Katherine Dunham authored *Dances of Haiti* (1938), and Zora Neale Hurston paralleled her methods and focus in important ways; Hurston’s *Voodoo Gods* (1939) richly covered black religion in Haiti, and her posthumously published *Sanctified Church* (1981) portrays important ethnographic details of black Pentecostalism in the early 20th century. By 1941, Arthur Fauset, an anthropologist, had published his *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, wherein he highlighted new religious movements such as the Moorish Science Temple and Father Divine’s Peace Mission. Melville Herskovits published *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), and he directly challenged other white scholars who claimed blacks had preserved no African-inspired culture.

By the 1960s and 1970s, social movements for desegregation and racial justice prompted debates about race and social power. This inspired scholars to consider themes such as slavery, black culture and resistance, nationalism, and freedom for understanding African American religions. In this context, E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America* (1974) countered Herskovits’s argument by insisting that African American culture was rooted entirely in their experience in the United States, not Africa. This perspective, Frazier believed, should have compelled whites to embrace blacks as fully American. Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974) emphasized a distinct African American culture by examining black folk songs, narratives, and material culture that arose during slavery, as did Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977). Gayraud Wilmore’s *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (1972) demonstrated the role of social protest in African American Christianity. Milton Sernett published his *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism* (1975), tracing the role of black Christian conversion during
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Studies of religion and the civil rights movements began to proliferate during the 1980s and 1990s and remain a vital aspect of scholarship. The vast majority of these have examined Martin Luther King Jr. and Malik Shabazz (Malcolm X). Among those focusing on religion is James H. Cone’s *Martin and Malcolm and America* (1991), which comparatively interprets the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malik Shabazz. Clayborn Carson has edited *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1998). Claude Clegg’s *An Original Man* (1997) examines the life and religious leadership of Elijah Muhammad. This was followed by Karl Evanzz’s *Messenger* (1999), which includes generous attention to the federal government’s engagement with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam (NOI). Manning Marable’s voluminous biographical *Malcolm X* (2009) has met with both enthusiasm and skepticism and will remain an important work. Also important are recent studies such as Barbara Savage’s *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us* (2008) and Rosetta Ross’s *Witnessing and Testifying* (2003), both of which expertly examine the overwhelming role of black women’s activism to unearth the intersection of religion and politics in the civil rights era. Anthony Pinn’s *Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (2002) advances an assessment of African American Christianity beyond the periodization of civil rights activism.

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(2013) examines black Judaism as it emerged under Rabbi Wentworth Matthew’s leadership. And John L. Jackson Jr.’s Thin Description (2013) is a meticulously conceived and ethnographically rich study of a community of Hebrew Israelites in Israel.

Scholars have also attended to the role of gender and sexuality in African American religions. Representative are Jaquelyn Grant’s White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus (1989), which accounts for the distinctive theological traditions of African American women; Delores Williams’s Sisters in the Wilderness (1993), which critiques the sexism of conventional black Christianity and its reliance on biblical patriarchal paradigms; Kelly Brown Douglas’s Sexuality and the Black Church (1999), which engages critically with heterosexism’s influence; Clarence E. Hardy III’s James Baldwin’s God (2003), which provides the most authoritative interpretation of Baldwin’s engagement with religion; and Stacy Boyd’s Black Men Worshipping (2011), which examines the social significance of masculinity in African American churches.

Studies of African American Islam have likewise constituted an important dimension of scholarship. C. Eric Lincoln’s Black Muslims in America (1961) was the first of these monographs and examines the NOI. Not until the 1990s, however, would a significant body of scholarship begin to emerge on the subject. Among these are Aminah McCloud’s African American Islam (1995); Richard Brent Turner’s Islam in the African American Experience (1997); Sylviane Diouf’s Servants of Allah (1998); and Robert Dannin’s Black Pilgrimage to Islam (2002). Edward E. Curtis IV would develop leadership in this area, producing several studies of African American Islam and of American Islam more broadly. His Islam in Black America (2002) and Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam (2006) argued powerfully for engaging African American Islam not through the lens of orthodoxy but rather through objective religious studies scholarship. And Herbert Berg’s Elijah Muhammad and Islam (2009) examined the singular responsibility of Muhammad for introducing Islam to African Americans.

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(2012) draw on ethnography of African American practitioners of Yoruba. Tracey Hucks’s *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (2012) is the most extensive study of Yoruba (Orisha-Vodu) in the United States.

Denominational studies of black religion have remained important while featuring new approaches. Recent monographs include Anthea Butler’s *Women in the Church of God in Christ* (2007), which brings valuable attention to the religious work of black women, who typically outnumber male parishioners in American churches. Also important is Amos Young and Estrelda Alexander’s edited *Afro-Pentecostalism* (2011). And M. Shawn Copeland’s *Uncommon Faithfulness* (2009) examines black Catholicism, which has received far too little attention from scholars. These denominational studies have been joined by others responding to the significant increase in black migration to the United States. Jacob Olupona and Regina Gemignani’s coedited *African Immigrant Religions in America* (2007) is representative. Also important is Moses Biney’s *From Africa to America* (2011), which traces developments among contemporary Ghanaian Christians in the United States. In the 21st century, scholars have also devoted important attention to megachurches and prosperity gospel, which deviate from conventional denominational patterns. Shayne Lee’s *T. D. Jakes* (2005) and Jonathan L. Walton’s *Watch This!* (2009) are insightful renderings of the transformative and complex role of black televangelism and megachurches. Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs’s *Black Megachurch* (2011) is an especially data-rich study of recent developments in African American religious life.

By the 21st century, a number of scholars emphasized the need for new frontiers and creative approaches to the subfield, as evidenced by Curtis Evans’s *Burden of Black Religion* (2008). Among the outcomes of this initiative was an emergence of scholarship on black religion and popular culture. Judith Weisenfeld’s *Hollywood Be Thy Name* (2007) examines the making of black religion through film. Lerone Martin’s *Preaching on Wax* (2014) discerns the immense impact of recorded sermons in the production of African American religious experience. Corey Walker’s *Noble Fight* (2008) excavates black religious agency within the context of freemasonry. Kathryn Lofton’s *Oprah* (2011) interprets Oprah Winfrey’s media career as a religious phenomenon to proffer a theoretical account of religion as a critical category achieved through secular formations. And LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant’s *Talking to the Dead* (2014) renders the interplay of religion and music in the spiritual lives of contemporary Gullah women.

Further Reading


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Notes:


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(17.) Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity, 102-105.
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(44.) Walton, *Watch This!*, 100.


(46.) Walton, *Watch This!*

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