

Christianity and the African American Cultural Awakening

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Abstract

My thesis discusses the nature of the inextricably interwoven dynamic of Christianity and African American culture. My major is English with a concentration in Creative Writing, and through my study of the nature of religion as it pertains to the African American community, it has expanded into the need for multiple different venues of research. Mainly being the utilization of online as well as school library resources.

Essentially, from the period of slavery to modern day, religious and spiritual influences shaped the African American community into one that is fueled by a constant need for liberation. It goes into detail about terms such as liberation, the different black theologies that developed over the last few hundred years and the difference between religion and spirituality. These distinctions are necessary in understanding the dynamic nature of Christianity and African American culture respectively.

My understanding of the growth of the African American community delves into the essence of the way racially based institutions serve to foster a desire for independence and the development of a new consciousness surrounding a, at times, artificially constructed past narrative. In recent years, Christianity in the African American community has become less of a center for growth, and more of a way to divide us. The argument present is that it is imperative that Christianity is viewed both objectively and subjectively, because as much as it provides meaning for people it is also a marketable commodity, especially in recent years.

African Americans' history with Christianity in the U.S. has been extremely convoluted. Christianity has always been used as a tool to bolster self-empowerment and cope with the state of inequality and disenfranchisement in the country. However, Christianity was only one aspect that made up black culture in the U.S. An amalgamation of West/East African religions, Islam and Christian denominations like Baptist and Methodist sects influenced the birth of the unique black culture that exists in America. And arguably the strongest element in the fight for African liberation was the internalization of all these combined practices, via African spirituality. Consequently, a huge part of the campaign for African liberation became a physical and spiritual return to Africa and connecting with one's roots. Ultimately, it was not the Christian church that defined the history of the African American community, but the combined religious, spiritual practices which bolstered its growth. Internalization, rather than institutionalization, which oftentimes becomes political, is what allowed for Christianity to survive in the community until today.

On October 16, 1995, a political demonstration in Washington, D.C., was held by over one million people, most notably African American men. Ranked among the largest gatherings of its kind in American history, the Million Man March quickly became one of the most historically significant events in U.S. history. However, the attitudes towards the leadership of the Million Man March were divided to say the least among the African American community. Support for it by black churches was not too favorable because of one factor in particular. Islamic leadership brought some Christian pastors, like one Black United Methodist Minister from Columbus, Ohio in April 1996, to say the following after describing Islam as a “feel good religion.”

How can I maintain my credibility with my congregation if I support the leadership of a man who uses the Koran as his primary text, and then quotes passages

from the Bible out of context. I do not believe in the Muslims. The Bible says thou shall have no other God before me. As a Christian I believe that all struggling groups should have common ground. We live more on our divisiveness than our togetherness (Best 253).

This very insensitive comment reflects the condescending views of one authoritative religious figure towards an “opposing” religion. And the word opposing is used sparingly of course, as that is the perspective of the Black Minister, who views Islam as a threat to Christian beliefs and personhood.

Over the last few hundred years, from the early 1700s to present day, Christianity has evolved into becoming arguably the most significant promoter of the growth of the African American community. In many ways however, it could have been seen as a tool for black empowerment and escaping the violent world of white oppressors in the pre-Antebellum South. In short, Christianity was used as a coping mechanism for African Americans throughout United States history to deal with institutionalized racism.

Slaves were taught Christianity through the mouths of twisted tongues. White oppressors manipulated the biblical text to enforce a sort of divine rule that would further disempower African slaves and teach them to be obedient, diligent workers. However, over time, African slaves internalized Christianity and adopted it to suit their own needs, rejecting the unequal and disempowering attitudes of many whites at the time.

Christianity is very effective at romanticizing conformity, enforcing model behavior and molding a peaceful and productive workforce, even today. It is utilized in various different ways with countless different messages, and boasts several denominations relating to its practice, such as the Protestant churches of Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations. Christianity was adapted by African slaves, infused with the Yoruba religion carried over from South/West Africa and essentially formed a new religion(s) that combined various practices to serve the

development of the spread out, shackled, yet steadily growing African American community in the pre-Antebellum South.

The concept of African liberation is a continual sociocultural and political process of rediscovery, re-humanization and newfound respectability for African history among the world's collective history. Colonialism and dependence on Europe removed African contributions from history. And so, liberation is the adoption of a new consciousness towards African history as it relates to African American identity. Oftentimes, resulting in the return of the African people to their homeland and taking their rightful place as contributors to the development of modern-day society (Nyaba 1).

African liberation has been approached in different ways as well, depending on time, place and outside influences not only religious in nature but political, economic and social. It isn't always seen as a physical return, or "going back," to Africa, but rather a more mental/spiritual state of return. An increased awareness and pride in African history, which has been overlooked and disregarded for centuries by Western forces. Over time liberation through religious enlightenment, specifically, has evolved into distinct, separate practices that are now inextricably interwoven into the sermons preached today in black Christian churches across the states.

However, the black race is eternally divided by their separate beliefs and political views. But a common goal that is shared between all factions of religious association is looking to better the future for their children. A future that not only involves accountability and economic, social and political upward mobility, but self-respect and the fostering of an ancestral cultural awakening (pride in African history).

Unfortunately, religion has been heavily institutionalized for centuries, and is preventing African Americans from embracing their true heritage. Christian churches in the U.S. have been controlled mainly by white men, and the road to independent black churches proved exceedingly difficult. The true heritage of African Americans is almost entirely left out of the biblical texts and framed in a way that discourages black liberation. Particularly when in the hands of Southern white men.

The secret meetings that African slaves performed in the woods to sing and praise their Christian God during times of strict control and oppression from people who referred to themselves as their masters is evidence that religion is not meant to be solely institutionalized any longer, and rather is much more effective as an internalized *ideology*. The gatherings in the woods demonstrated a common shared interest, one that needn't be held in an institution or formal setting but was fueled by a desire to connect with the Spirit of God. There are no steps, no required contributions, no positions among the staff that certain genders or races cannot acquire. It was truly a common ground that was made into a sacred space by a small group of people seeking something more from the world.

Christianity in recent times has served as more of a dividing force, in spite of its adaptation to the beliefs of an era and utilization as a source of political, economic and social betterment for a community. However, the development of megachurches and the fact that Christianity lasted throughout the centuries of racism and oppression towards blacks and other minorities reflects its dynamic nature. Through the distinctive lens of scholars, historians, and writers, Christianity was both challenged and simultaneously spread by numerous significant figures of the African American community, a few of the most renowned being W. E. B. Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins and Edward W. Blyden who all serve as massive actants of change.

Originally, in the early 1700s the first Great Awakening had led many enslaved people in the United States to convert to Christianity. Also referred to as the Evangelical Revival, the first Great Awakening was a series of Christian revivals that swept Britain and its thirteen North American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. The revival movement permanently impacted Protestantism as devout believers strove to renew individual piety and religious devotion. The revival of Protestant beliefs was part of a much larger movement that was taking place in England, Scotland, and Germany at that time.

Through the 18th and 19th centuries, distinct Black churches emerged, seeking autonomy from white Christians (Second Great Awakening). These congregations grew into denominations, and many thrive in the present day. They have served as homes to various political and religious movements, including Black nationalism and liberation theology (Maffly-Kipp 1). Teaching Christianity to slaves had its issues, however, because of the growing fear of knowledge and empowerment among the slaves. And as they feared, Christianity eventually led to the downfall of the system of slavery after being received by African American communities and consequently reshaping them, providing a source of strength and hope for the community.

The black church that institutionalized Christianity became synonymous with the struggle for civil rights. Paradoxically, the white Americans that enforced Christianity onto black Americans in order to evangelize them and ultimately make them more content in their enslavement essentially pushed black persons away from their cause. Because the religion provided the language and context under which African Americans could survive under slavery and form African American freedom efforts to destroy legal segregation. Abolitionists used the context of the Bible and Christian tradition to persuasively argue against slavery. And It was Black Christian parishioners, specifically, that pushed the civil rights movement into being,

arguably the most important social movement of twentieth-century American history (Harvey 6). Furthermore, Black churches are one of the few black institutions that have been able to survive in the post-civil rights era, as a result of the separation of the church from the white community after the late eighteenth century.

Many blacks saw these white churches, in which ministers promoted obedience to one's master as the highest religious ideal, as a mockery of the "true" Christian message of equality and liberation as they knew it. Thus, African Americans were obliged to adopt their own "invisible institutions." It became commonplace and even encouraged African slaves practiced Christianity, but they still weren't allowed to read and write or even enjoy the same privileges as whites in the churches. For instance, white sermons would take place and only then could blacks enter and have theirs, and any blacks that did attend a white sermon had to sit towards the back.

Other religions, however, have been affecting the community by this point since the time when African slaves were first brought over to the New World. They carried with them a wide array of religious beliefs throughout the journey through the Middle Passage, which led to a diversity within the peoples that reflected the many cultures and linguistic groups from which they had come.

The majority came from the West Coast of Africa, but even within this area religious traditions varied greatly. Preserving African religions in North America, however, proved to be extremely difficult. African American religious ideals, as a whole, are shaped by these original beliefs corresponding with their tribal character from Africa and the newly adopted beliefs enforced by American slave owners. Religion was used as a tool to control African slaves in all parts of the country, where they were made to believe serving their master was a responsibility and that they would be duly rewarded by God in the afterlife for their services. Thus, the

religious background of the slaves featured a complex system of beliefs, and in the life of the African community there was a close relationship between the natural and the supernatural, the secular and the sacred (Raboteau 15).

Africans generally held a profound belief in an overarching but relatively distant Spirit, who oversaw a huge variety of deities. These lesser gods, in turn, inhabited objects in the world. Africans venerated and provided beseeching and appeasing the lesser deities who were responsible for the world of matter and spirit. These were, in the Yoruba tongue of present-day Nigeria, the orishas, spirits who commanded a variety of religious practices.

Besides rituals of song and dance, rituals of medicine also shaped religious life in West and Central Africa (15). In the Kongo Kingdom, religious life focused on *minkisi*, spirits who could harm or cure. Religious syncretism, the melding of religious traditions, which was common in Africa in such places as the Kongo, continued in North America (16).

Traditional African religions, most prominent the Orisha religion, from the Nigerian Yoruba term of spirit manifestations of the high God Olorun. Orisha religions predominated in most of the supplying areas of the slave trade until the ninth century, when Islam started to spread to North America and into the northernmost districts of the slave-trading regions, namely, Senegambia, and the kingdom of Ghana. Far to the South and East, Christianity exercised its greatest influence in the Kingdoms of Kongo and Ndongo, north of the present-day Angola.

Simultaneously, many clergy within the various Christian denominations like Methodist and Baptist sects actively promoted the idea that all Christians were equal in the sight of god, a message that provided hope and sustenance to the slaves. It impacted African slaves like no other religion before. Not only did they encourage worship in ways that many Africans found to be similar, or at least adaptable, to African worship patterns, with enthusiastic singing, clapping,

dancing, and even spirit-possession, but many white owners *insisted* on slave attendance at white-controlled churches, since they were fearful that if slaves were allowed to worship independently, they would ultimately plot rebellion against their owners (Maffly-Kipp 1). Hence, the case of the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739.

Religious beliefs not only allowed enslaved people to survive the insufferable conditions in the U.S. but also empowered resistance. The Stono Rebellion Nat Turner led, and Nat Turner's slave revolt the following century demonstrated the religious roots of slave resistance, a recurring theme of numerous African slave revolts. The Stono Rebellion's significance lies in its time of occurrence, because at around this time evangelical Christian missionaries were just beginning to make their first successful rounds preaching a gospel of gospel equality to a scattered and small yet receptive African audience. Nat Turner became a passionate minister and preacher of enslaved Africans, and felt he was chosen by God to lead his people out of bondage.

In 1831, Turner became convinced that the time had come to rise up and fight for freedom, after hearing divine voices and being swayed by the signs he believed in, following an eclipse of the sun. He ultimately led an insurrection resulting in the deaths of fifty-five whites with the help of over seventy enslaved people. In both cases the carnage led to new waves of oppressive legislation over slaves and stiffened pro-slavery, anti-abolitionist convictions.

Black churches were a subject largely ignored by historians of religion in America, despite common knowledge black religious institutions have been the foundation of Afro-American culture. Even though there are various denominations covered in Barnes' *Black Megachurch Culture* and other sources, they all link together in a way that reflects Christian faith and empowerment for the black community. Raboteau directs them as an "agency of social control, a source of economic cooperation, an arena for political activity, a sponsor of education,

and a refuge in a hostile white world; the black Church has been historically the social center of Afro-American life. But it has worked against early Blacks nearly just as much as for them.

The political atmosphere amongst the black church throughout the centuries has been a consistent thorn in the side of growth for the community. It is the main dividing force that has been problematic between members of the black church as activism and the fight for civil liberties tends to be political in nature. In such events as the civil rights movement and the Million Man March, political differences between the left and right caused strife within the community.

While the “black church” signifies unity amongst the community that emerged from the Christianization of black Americans during the Great Awakenings, it also represents the effective political movements that arose out of the black denominations like the Protestant denominations of Baptist and Methodist that the black church created. However, since the New Deal of the 1930s, African Americans have become associated with a powerful and solid voting bloc of the Democratic Party despite sharing more conservative and strictly evangelical views. Another paradox presents itself, as Christian theology has fueled a history of social activism associated with liberal causes. In recent years, white activists campaigning for abortion and gay rights created ideological alliances on the religious-political right. Black churches, however, still also remained aligned with the civil rights agenda, and black voters still turned out for Democratic and liberal candidates (Harvey 7).

There are three religious belief systems scholars have linked to the divisions in Black public opinion: the social gospel, black liberation theology and the prosperity gospel. Firstly, the social gospel argues for the method to achieving salvation is met through a connection with the divine and working to achieve social equality. It is closely linked to the civil rights movement.

Black liberation theology on the other hand argues that there is a parallel between the experiences of Blacks in America and the persecution of biblical figures, also having been linked to calls for radical change, such as Black nationalism and feminism. Finally, prosperity gospel is a newer concept, one that is heavily preached in today's "megachurches" (huge nondenominational congregations). Specifically, through the massive, televised following surrounding the widely renowned religious figure T. D. Jakes. Jake pushes this gospel to an integrated crowd of very enthusiastic followers of the faith. The term "prosperity gospel" is a contemporary theological movement arguing that people of faith will be rewarded with material wealth. Because of the rise of this new cultural movement, mainstream denominations such as Baptist and Methodists may eventually come to be seen as irrelevant (McDaniel 1).

However, the Protestant denominational religions that became prominent during slavery times had such a significant effect on the country it became a key reason for today's racial discourse. Traditional forms of slavery found worldwide were not racially based unlike slavery in the Americas, which was a strictly *racial* form of bondage. Any religious defense of slavery in America would have to clarify God's providence in having one race of people enslave another. Euro-Americans began to define what constituted whiteness and blackness, categories that would long outlive slavery itself. And those categories were, at least initially, fundamentally religious ones (Harvey 16). In short, *religion created race, and race thereafter shaped religion.*

White supremacist racial thought emerged in the fifteenth century and significantly shaped the interactions between Europeans and Africans. Religious divisions drawn by Europeans, between followers of Christ and heathens, helped define the meaning of race. "European" and "English" meant "Christian" and "white." Meanwhile, "African," meant "heathen," in spite of the fact that many Africans had been Christianized and large sections of

North and sub-Saharan Africa had fallen under the sway of Islam. But for European Christians, Africans were still heathens and black. Thus, the categories of religion and race intertwined, each helping to define the other. Religion supported the creation and solidification of modern notions of whiteness and blackness.

From the perspective of European slavers, traders, and colonizers, Africans had no religion. Rather, they possessed “pagan” or “barbaric” customs. Even Europeans who lived and worked alongside Africans in Africa, being heavily influenced by Islamic and Catholic missionaries, still could not see their subjects as practicing religion. The very process of enslavement essentially forced Europeans to place the victims outside the realm of being human. Christians of course could not be enslaved, but non-Christians on the other hand . . . absolutely. The earliest process of racializing diverse peoples typically involved ignoring, denying, or even denigrating their religions. This was a common theme amongst both Christian and Islamic enslavers (Harvey 17).

Idealism and brutality often went together during the early periods of American colonization. It wasn't uncommon for idealism and imperialism to coincide in projects both inspiring and ignoble. The enslavement of African American people and the explosion of Protestant evangelicalism essentially transpired simultaneously (5). In the twentieth century, however, Christian thought helped to undermine the racial system it had been instrumental in creating. The civil rights revolution in American history was to a considerable degree, a religious revolution, one whose social and spiritual impact inspired numerous other movements around the world.

Beyond the Civil Rights Movement and the end of the officially sanctioned segregation in America, religious institutions have remained largely, and voluntarily, separated by race. In a

society sometimes said to be moving into a “post-racial” era, ethnic and racial constructions still remain a central ordering fact of religious life. Religious congregations nevertheless tend to be racially segregated, a simple reality of how Americans of diverse ethnic backgrounds have oriented their lives (Harvey 6). Black churches, or churches in general, have been internally divided by slave versus free churches, by cultural practices, by skin tone and levels of education, by theological traditions, and by religion. The very popularity and singularity of the term “black church” suggests a unified force that emerged from the Christianization of black Americans during the Great Awakenings.

However, “The Black Church as we know it, or imagined it, is [now] dead,” wrote the African American religious scholar Eddie Glaude in an online polemic in February of 2010, sparking a whole surge of online debate. However, many agreed with him, stating that someone finally said the “cold hard truth.” Glaude concluded that African Americans still generally go and identify with religious institutions in higher proportions than any other group in American society, but that it is no longer the same central position that represented the social and moral conscience of the nation (Harvey 2). “The death of the black church as we have known it occasions an opportunity to breathe new life into what it means to be black and Christian.”

Religious myth, originating from interpretations of biblical stories as well as speculations about God’s Providence, served as a key instrument in the formation, revision, and reconstruction of racial categories in the modern world. Christianity was central to the process of racializing people by imposing categories of racial hierarchies upon groups of humanity or other societies. Yet if Christianity fostered racialization, it also could be said to have undermined it. Biblical passages were powerful yet ambiguous, and arguments about God’s Providence in colonization, the slave trade, and Christian missions to slaves were highly controversial.

Christian myths and stories were central to the project of creating racial categories in the modern world. But the central text of Christianity, the Bible, was also subjective to more universal visions. In that sense, it could never really be a completely reliable ally for theorists of racial discourse (Harvey 5).

W. E. B. Du Bois, according to many scholars such as Robert A. Wortham, is the founding father of the sociology of religion, or the founding figure of the sociological study of the Black Church. In 1903 this classic *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois, with contributions from nationalist Martin Delany, both described how a history of African American Christianity would show that religious institutions and practices had brought black Americans through centuries of turmoil and struggle. Delany was a keen observer of the role of the black church in providing a public forum for a people generally enslaved, ignored and scorned by white Americans, concluding the role of the church to be the “social center of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character (Harvey 1).”

Narratively as well, religion serves as a key driver of socioeconomic movement for African Americans. Religion has often been defined as “the opiate of the masses.” Best discusses how religious leadership may carry a distinction of being divine as one is “serving” God by guiding the people, and by challenging the dominant social order that opposes their convictions some leaders have been able to transcend the individual identities of their audience as victims and the broader, oppressive social dynamics in which their groups are embedded (Best 18).

Having a religious position as a minister/pastor is a power move. Meaning, it is a way to establish authority and influence over others in a way other positions at the time could not. Especially, when certain judicial occupations were not available to African Americans.

However, we can't talk about religion without talking about mysticism and spirituality like Hopkins in *Of One Blood*. Pauline Hopkins uses themes of music, mysticism and other forms of spiritual play to converge themes of race, identity, freedom and equality in stories full of action and suspense. Christianity was the base religion used to represent notions of escapism and identity, as well as rebellious notions of empowerment.

In her story Reuel comes to understand that Telessar, this undiscovered country to Africa, is, in essence, "the undiscovered country within ourselves - the hidden self-lying quiescent in every human soul" awaiting its awakening. Another idea central to her story, derived from the Biblical passage, "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God (Psalms 68:31), comes in the form of a prophecy that entails Africa would be delivered from the "darkness of heathenism. However, it came to be interpreted more widely as "a promise that Africa [would]. . . experience a dramatic political, industrial, and economic renaissance", or that the "black man [would] rule the world" (157) (xix).

Ethiopianism, like Pan-Africanism more generally represented to Hopkins and her peers, is a belief system of practical value. It links African Americans to their African past, promising them a future deliverance foretold in the Old Testament and inscribed in such spirituals as "Go Down Moses," which Dianthe sings throughout the book (xx).

Spirituals have played a significant role as vehicles for protest at intermittent points during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. "As Africanized Christianity took hold of the slave population, spirituals served as a way to express the community's new faith, as well as its sorrows and hopes (*African American Spirituals* 1)." It was a way for African slaves to not only vocalize their discontent but use music as a way to further bring the community together. Sorrow songs in particular was a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois and was used to articulate a

certain kind of spiritual that vocalizes a message of the slave to the world; typically encapsulating tales of death and suffering, and or longing for a better life. Gospel songs are another form of self-expression and vocalizing their beliefs.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, spirituals as well as Gospel songs supported the efforts of civil rights activists. They fall under many frameworks, including “Sorrow Songs,” which is a type of spiritual. They are typically intense, slow, and melancholic. Sometimes they are even regarded as codified protest songs, with songs such as "Steal away to Jesus," composed by Wallis Willis, being seen by some commentators as incitements to escape slavery.

Emerging from the slave quarters, scarcely noticed by whites until after the Civil War, African American spirituals still stand as one of America’s most profound contributions to theology and culture. The spirituals came from a mixture of white evangelical hymnology, African traditional song and dance, and Southern black folklore. The slaves incorporated their own distinct images, and literary devices into the songs, despite many spirituals having some influence from the white evangelical tunes that made their way to the churches in the newly settled areas. Thus, the spirituals cannot be attributed to individual authors, but instead emerged as a communal voice of slave believers. They incorporated countless variations of the stories of Moses, King David, and King Jesus, and also offered ways for slaves to think about evil.

“It was soon discovered that the Negro possessed a phenomenal gift of music, and it was determined to utilize this gift in helping to support educational institutions of color in the Southland (Hopkins 11). The intertextuality present here between African Americans and the notion of music and vocals goes even beyond Christianity and branches into new territory in itself. As with the character of Dianthe, the collective voice of the African American community

through communal singing and worship demonstrates a unique characteristic of the community, further helping to form the distinct black identity. Even today, black churches are known for their ecstatic, very vocal and active church services.

The writings of African Americans who converted because of the Great Awakening constitute some of the earliest black American Literature (Harvey 31). Literature provided a key outlet for African Americans to express themes and address controversial topics of the time that reflected a growing African sentiment towards empowerment and served as a narrative device to educate other African Americans. Pauline Hopkins was a huge follower of Du Bois, who coined the “problem of the twentieth century” in the *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and integrated some social commentary into her story as a response to his work.

The turn of the twentieth century witnessed a significant emergence of black literary talent, such as Charles Chestnutt, Paul Laurence-Dubar, and Anna Julia Cooper to name just a few. Not only did their work appear in such leading white periodicals as *Harper’s Magazine*, *Century Magazine*, and *Atlantic Monthly*, the simultaneous “rise of African American journals provided these writers alternative, often less restrictive forums for expression” (McDowell xxviii).

The Colored American Magazine was one such journal, Hopkins serving as a creative driving force behind it, serving as its literary editor from 1903-1904. As for her choice to write fiction, she explicitly states that literature had transformative social value and counter-discursive power like most of her black contemporaries. In her preface to *Contending Forces*, she says that “Fiction is of great value, to any people as a preserver of manners and customs - *religious*, political and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation,” (Hopkins vii). And that is the essence of what Hopkins was trying to do with *Of One Blood*,

establish a narrative of growth and discovery, into the realm of fostering nationalism and pride in African history by establishing a fictional yet entirely possible timeline that serves more as a metaphor and state of mind than a physical space. It is a collective, an established notion of possibility and legend, the creation of a new history, one could follow or even recreate someday. Ethiopia is the birthplace of a new idea, a new framework of thought about what it means to be African and a descendant of Africans.

In America, Christianity does significantly support black liberation and the establishment of individualized institutions. However, in *Of One Blood* religion is somewhat removed and more emphasis is placed on the supernatural and the divine. Religion is institutionalized, and by removing the novel from it and focusing more on a utopian alternate black history the novel thus decenters whiteness as well. The distance from Christianity allows for the rise of black nationalism. Hopkins employs elements of Ethiopianism in order to draw attention to the utopian “early greatness of the African race” and the dystopian experiences in modern-day America (Reid 94-95). Hopkins' fantasy was indeed connected to a broader initiative to rewrite African history, an objective she shared with other African American intellectuals of the day, both lay and academic (Hopkins xvii).

Her intent was less to promote back-to-Africa philosophy as some scholars claim but as a “patently escapist fiction meant to flee the brutality and racism of American history in favor of lost history of great wealth, material achievement, and intellectual superiority” (Sundquist, 569). She sought to draw from it a popularized basis for pride in black history and more importantly a theoretically complex way to understand African American double consciousness (Sundquist, 573) (xvi). She later published a booklet which contributed to a shelf of other books that were all devoted to claiming and extolling greatness of an ancient African past (Hopkins xvii).

The growing sentiment towards a historically significant African heritage that could foster pride and nationalist ideals centering around Africa and the subsequent return to [it], became known as *Africaness*. A term coined by Edward W. Blyden which did in fact involve a call to return back to Africa. A result of increasing disenchantment by Western values or rebuffed by Europeans in their attempt to assimilate Western culture. Some West African intellectuals began to assert their *Africaness* and circulate a measure of African ideals among black Americans in the nineteenth century. Although African students became inflamed by the racial themes of Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. DuBois and the Harlem Renaissance in the twentieth century, it was these ideals that were circulated among them the previous century that made such a profound impact.

While some of Blyden's accounts did romanticize African life to a fair degree, his view frequently reflected a truer image of Africa than that of Western observers who noted only savagery and paganism. Blyden emphasized four main themes in the defense of the Negro race: it possessed past achievements worthy of pride; its African traditions and culture must be preserved; its progress was thwarted by adherence to Christianity and enhanced by the pursuit of Islam; and it had intrinsic qualities which he termed the "African Personality." By firmly building on his vibrant philosophy, Blyden proved to be a spiritual father of the reassertion of black pride that is highly characteristic of the mid-twentieth century.

Du Bois had a similar sentiment on the nature of Christianity's negative impact on African American community, he contributed to the development of black nationalism in his 1903 article *Souls of Black Folks*: "This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted,

dispersed, or forgotten. The shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx,” (DuBois 1).

It is interesting to note that the destruction of African religions as belief systems was especially evident among enslaved Africans taken to the northern colonies of British North America. Their small numbers, their geographic dispersal, and their placement on small plantations and farms away from larger groupings of other Africans tended to undermine African religious systems. In contrast, on the West Indian Islands and in Brazil, the higher numbers, and greater concentrations of slaves in smaller locales allowed for greater survival of African religious traditions. In these regions, a different religious history emerged as a result (Harvey 18).

The brutality of the Middle Passage, the spread of slavery to colonial North America, and the repression that met uprisings, real or imagined, such as in South Carolina and New York, all speak to the obstacles Africans faces in adapting religious practices to their harsh new environments. In North America, slaves attempting to create communal cultures in their new worlds drew on their African past and their diverse variety of religious traditions, including Yoruba practices, Islam and Christianity. But their experiences there either limited or transformed their religious practices altogether (Harvey 26).

Despite the prevalence of Christianity among the developing African American community, “the truth about the role of religion [in general] in helping slaves cope with their hardships is evident: religion gave slaves a sense of personhood, dignity and power that they were otherwise denied in their lives, a way of showing the world their humanity and a way of resisting the gruesome experience of slavery,” (Basu-Zharku 1). Thus, a method for providing

the necessary means of dealing with the severe conditions inflicted by slavery, and it didn't simply end at Christianity as the be-all-end-all religion.

Just as Blyden was adamant about Africa's place in world history, he was simultaneously convinced that Islam exercised an advantageous effect on African people. Islam, according to Blyden, discourages racial discrimination, allowing Africans to achieve portions of distinction while retaining their Africanness. He gave high praise to Muslim society for fostering scholarship as well, as well as for developing urban civilization, and for creating an egalitarian spirit which "bound tribes together in one strong religious fraternity." Additionally, he pinpointed a central contradiction of the Christian world that confronted black people: they were expected to emulate the values of those who held them in contempt. Thus, effectively anticipating the dilemma of contemporary black Americans, some of whom have attempted to avoid its implications by adopting the Islamic faith or rejecting Christianity altogether.

Blyden's ideals resulted from a combined belief in Islam's ability to uplift Africans in their search for education and the diaspora: *Africa represented the proper home for the Negro race* (Burkett Newman 17). In the previous century, Black theologians and intellectuals such as Henry McNeal Turner and a host of other African Methodist writers in that era produced a genre of "racial histories" that explained the origins and destiny of the race to African American readers. These race writers collectively disputed the racist notions of inherent inferiority and gave to African Americans in many cases instead an identifiable and honorable history and heritage. African American religious thinkers challenged the creation of blackness as equivalent to inferiority and shame. They sought to influence the discussion of race in America by imparting to blacks a dignified history and a respectable present.

Blyden believed that the African psyche possessed a certain spirituality that others would do well to emulate as well. This spiritualness was a result of the Africans' close communion with nature. Africans made no clear-cut distinction between religious and secular life; rather the two were inextricably interwoven in the seamless fabric of daily experience-agriculture maintenance, political and religious ceremonies, birth, and death. Africa's tolerance toward Christianity and Islam and its pronounced traditional religious sense prompted Blyden to conclude that "Africa may yet prove to be the spiritual conservatory of the world (Burkett Newman 15)."

He perceived his mission as not only to challenge the negative assumptions about the Negro race but also to instill a sense of pride in black people in Africa and diaspora: "As a race you are independent and distinct and have a mission to perform." Ultimately, his ideas helped spark the black cultural renaissance of the twentieth century. And in doing so, Blyden was a principal precursor of much of the awakened African consciousness in America (Burkett Newman 17). This speaks to Hopkins' double consciousness, a notion that there exist two identities for the African American. One of bondage and the oppression suffered in the New World as well as its enforced values and beliefs, and the other of a distinct African identity bonded to the past through the unacknowledged feats of ancestors in the motherland.

In the Jim Crow Era that lasted from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth (1950s), the first World War took place. Several influences produced a New World black interest in Ethiopia after WW1, the most potent of which was Garveyism. Marcus Garvey, founder and president of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, influenced a number of African Americans and West Indians towards service in Africa. Garveyism had a huge appeal to both the black Americans and West Indians in the states, but most of the emigrants to Ethiopia were West Indians like Garvey himself. When post-war America did not measure up to their

hopes, many people were simply prepared to move on. They likely would not have gone unless they had caught Garvey's fundamental message of skilled service however that gave them that last push. However, the black rabbi was equally influential in projecting Ethiopia as the most appropriate decision (Burkett Newman 50).

Arnold J. Ford, after being attracted to Garveyism and then serving as the musical director of Liberty Wall (Garvey's main meeting place), composed, and directed many of the hymns that expressed the spiritual side of Garveyism. They encapsulate the religious feelings of the group that would shortly come to America. The main source of these attitudes is the twenty hymns of Ford's Universal Ethiopian Hymnal. His vision of Africa was similar to poets of the Negro renaissance, such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay: Africa was the promised land; ancient, bright, and glorious; land of "pristine worth"; marked by its culture and its stages. Africa was the paradise lost, from which blacks went out to slavery exile, and to which they must return.

Ford, following Garvey and other New World blacks, believed that the awakening of African was a major obligation upon the blacks of the diaspora (Burkett Newman 51). Blacks in another country became a collective religious figure, a Negro abroad depicted as "man of sorrows," refined in the fire of slavery for tasks in the motherland. Also, Ford's imagery shares with other New World blacks the idea that the diaspora is parallel to the earlier Jewish exile from Jerusalem (51). By the early twenties Ford became the leading spokesman of the various sects of black Jews in Harlem. In the Universal Ethiopian Anthem, he suggests that Israel is almost interchangeable with the black community (51).

Blacks becoming religious figures was quite difficult to conceive amongst the white slave-owning class in the pre-Antebellum South. Uneasiness about black Christianization during

combined with the uncertainty about whether slave conversion would undermine the social order, plagued many slave-owning whites. Meanwhile, Christian bondspeople, basing their beliefs on the biblical promise of equality and justice, employed the liberating potential of evangelicalism to challenge the premises that underlay slavery and white supremacy (Harvey 27). The rise of the evangelical religion in the eighteenth century threatened other denominations of Christianity in the Americas, including Congregationalism in New England, Presbyterianism in the Middle Colonies, and Anglicanism in the South.

Most planters wanted nothing to do with a religion that suggested anything about equality of souls. As a result, the antislavery sentiment expressed by some early Southern Baptists and Methodists didn't survive into the antebellum era. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the alliance between the ministerial establishment and the master class strengthened. They discouraged black independent, religious expression, which threatened good order, but encouraged white-supervised religious expression. The Christianization of the planter class, the introduction of slavery in the interior of the new nation, and the adoption of an ideal of the planter patriarch as "Christian steward" substantially fed into planter support for missionary work among the slaves (Harvey 35). Thus, the institutionalization of Christianity became much more prominent, effectively in a way that both satisfied whites and tightened the control over African slaves.

Regarding the Baptist and Methodist sects, their system of itinerant and circuit-riding preachers became a final factor in the expansive spread of evangelicalism among both whites and blacks (36). The Methodist churches first arose as a renewal and reform movement within the Church of England in the mid-eighteenth century. The churches combined a centralized system of church hierarchy with a decentralized system of circuit-riding ministers whose mobility

allowed for the rapid spread of Methodism. Introducing weekly classes that eventually became what is today Sunday schools on top of that. Baptist churches, which first came to America from England early in the colonial era, define themselves through a complete water immersion, symbolic of salvation and independence of local congregations from any higher authority. Any group of Christians could start its own Baptist church and call a minister who needed no higher qualification than being “called” by God. Thus, it became very popular in the African American community, who lacked the educational institutions to produce credentialed ministers.

The Great Awakenings and territorial expansion of slavery and evangelical itinerancy among Methodists, Baptists and other evangelical groups transformed a relatively “unchurched” South into the Bible Belt from the revolutionary era to the Civil War. Thus, the Awakenings ultimately democratized religion in the region, and Christian doctrine planters hoped what would create submissive slaves instead produced a class of people uncomfortable with any idea of equality, even spiritual equality. However, the Great Awakenings also paved the way for the first independent black denomination: the African Methodist Episcopal Church, first organized in the 1790s and legally incorporated in 1816 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Harvey 37).

Jones, Allen, and the early black Methodists fused ideas of Christian universalism, universal equality, citizen rights and black separatism. This delicate balancing act thereafter defined the role of black Christian churches. African Americans claimed their heritage, yet they understood that black churches were necessary in the struggle for African American rights. In short, they sought to be Africans and Americans, conscious of their heritage but securely placed as American citizens (Harvey 40). Double-consciousness.

The inherently inegalitarian social order of slavery had overcome the original vision of the Moravians which hailed from Bohemia, the most radically egalitarian of eighteenth-century

evangelicals. The Moravian experience set a broader course for the hierarchy of race within American Protestant churches. Despite the biblical admonition that in Christ there was neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, American evangelicalism reinforced and policed racial boundaries in American society. Southern evangelicals declared that the American social order reflected the will of God and that God executed men and women to perform their duties within their social stations. African Americans responded by adapting Christianity for their own purposes.

Black Christian beliefs and rituals shielded them from the system of racial subjugation supported by their “white brethren” as God’s plan to Christianize the heathens. Slave preachers and, especially, slave music and religious rituals kept alive the message of freedom in ways that sustained generations through the storm and through the night of the antebellum years when cotton was king, and slavery’s expansion seemed unstoppable (48). During the antebellum era, from the 1830s to the Civil War, black Christianity assumed its full form in both the South and the North.

Black Christians developed a religious culture that brought together elements of their African past and their American evangelical training, resulting in the creation of a unique American religious culture. It mainly developed in sacred spaces slaves created for themselves. Before the Civil War, black religious life manifested itself most clearly in black religious rituals, which included “ring shouts,” spirituals, and chanted sermons (49). Independent black denominations and black churches within the major American denominations expanded in the states north of the Mason-Dixon line (50). Newbell N. Puckett, the major name in researching religion and slavery from the 1920s to the 1960s, noted how learning the bible by singing

(because slaves were not taught to read or write), and singing spirituals to let fellow slaves know of a religious meeting at night became traits of the slaves' agency (Basu-Zharku 1).

Slaves recognized that Southern whites used the Bible to justify slavery as God's predestined fate for black people. They countered this view with their songs, which contained powerful images of self-worth and transcendence (Harvey 60). Rhythmically and sonically, African song styles transformed Protestant hymns into black spirituals (61). The African contribution to the spirituals is mostly clearly demonstrated in the ritual accompanying the singing; the moans, shuffles, dances, foot stamping, and hard clapping are central to African American religious expression (61). Evangelicals prohibited dancing, so African Americans adopted shuffling without the crossing of feet in response.

Continued presence of African practices such as shouts, grave decorations, spirit possessions, visions of "King Jesus," and a belief in magic and "superstition," angered Christian planters and other whites (54). Whites were also particularly troubled by the slaves' continued practice of "conjure," or "black magic." Slaves frequently called it "hoodoo," and the practice of conjure, a form of healing and counter-harming that drew from both Christianity and African-based religious elements, was particularly common among slaves. Belief in conjure - or at least a willingness to suspend disbelief - pervaded much of the Deep South among blacks and whites alike.

Whites in the South's backcountry also consulted the conjure men, for Euro-American folk beliefs often paralleled that of Africans and African Americans. In an age of harmful and relatively ineffective professional medicine, ordinary Americans sought relief from illnesses and ailments wherever they could. Slaves commonly consulted the services of a conjure man, a sort of folk priest who claimed special powers and knowledge of the spiritual potentials of natural

materials. The conjure man had access to forces that could provide protection or harm one's enemies (Harvey 55). Conjure bags, made from an assortment of gathered organic materials, also resembled Kongo *minkisi* in that they served as focal objects for ritual beliefs and practices.

Folk beliefs that imparted spiritual meanings to objects in the natural world remained a resilient part of Southern folklore. Studies of the mutual relationship between religion and magic show how these different ways of thinking about the supernatural world interact, collide, complement, and supplement one another. For enslaved people, conjure supplemented Christianity. They became two different ways to access the spirit world. Conjure provided pragmatic beliefs that Christianity did not, while Christianity provided reassurance about the fate of human souls in a way that the pragmatic manipulations of conjure men could not (Harvey 56).

Meanwhile, in the antebellum North free people of color developed a religious culture that situated them as respectable members of a free republic. Northern black churches, especially those associated with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) churches, sponsored publications that encouraged African Americans to recount their religious strivings. First published in the 1850s, the *Christian Recorder*, the AME Church's official newspaper, served as a central repository of African American religious thought. Later publications, including the A.M.E. *Church Review*, provided African American ministers with a forum to discuss theological issues.

These Northern black churches also sponsored schools to educate children, insurance and burial societies to help people prepare for the passing of family members, and lecture halls for black adults to hear addresses on subjects of public interest. They also hosted conventions at which black men and women expressed their opposition to slavery and their demands for black

citizenship rights. In this sense, Northern black churches already were centers of political activity during the antebellum era and helped prepare the way for Southern black churches to serve a similar role after the Civil War (Harvey 63).

The black churches in the North afforded crucial spaces for the powerful voices of black abolitionists, including those of women. Two icons of black freedom were Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Both were empowered by deeply felt religious callings, premonitions, and visions. To many they appeared to be the embodiment of spiritual female Old Testament heroes (Harvey 63). Truth became known as possibly the most widely renowned female antislavery speaker, her commanding voice drawing mass crowds of admirers, detractors, and just curious passerby as she preached abolition on the itinerant circuit. Tubman traveled back to the South after escaping from the clutches of slavery herself thirteen times to bring over seventy slaves to freedom in the North and Canada. She was bestowed the nickname “Moses” by her African American brethren who knew her for her religious connections and daring prowess (65).

The importation of African Muslims shaped the religious practices of many slaves as well. Southern missionaries observed Muslim slaves who insisted that the Christian God was the same as Allah and that Jesus Christ was simply a different name for Muhammad. They practiced in Christian slave gatherings at night and then prayed at sunrise by bowing to the East. In this way, Muslim forms persisted in slave communities even among slaves who claimed Christianity as their religious faith (Harvey 54).

More recently, Islam and Christianity clashed during the Million Man March led by Blyden himself. October 16, 1995, was recorded as one of the most important days in the political developmental history of African-Americans in the United States. This day witnessed the execution of the largest mass political demonstration in the history of America, a gathering of

more than 1.2 million African American men in Washington, D.C. under the banner of the Million Man March. The march echoed the focus on power and system level change that emerged as a recurring theme of the 1960s civil rights protest movement and the national mobilization against the war in Vietnam.

One key political objective of the March was to place the issue of Black suffering back on the national policy agenda. The leading Republican party was largely ignoring the black crises sweeping the nation. Black city victims were blamed for their own economic and community hardships. Expressing extreme concern for increasing racism in America and the deterioration of the social, cultural as well as moral fabric of the Black community, Black men came to Washington. And in the words of the March's Mission Statement, as a collective they were "Committed to the ongoing struggle for a free and empowered community, a just society and better world."

However, candidates for public office recognized that any effort to mobilize mass support in the Black community must be grounded by the church and strong support from individual Black ministers. The incorporation of Black churches and their leaders into the organizational and operational framework of the Million Man March mobilization efforts became, at an early stage, one of the key strategic objectives of putting together committees at the national and local level. Because Black churches represent an unrivaled structure of power in the Black community and share a long history of involvement in community service and social mobilization, it only made sense that without much of their support the Million Man March proved to be very difficult to execute effectively.

The religious foundations of the march were both broad and deep, representing considerable support from the Muslim community as well as strong support from a handful of

Black Christian organizations. However, opposition from within the ranks of the Black church itself was intense (Best 252). One of the most significant reasons being that many ministers argued they were compelled to oppose the march because of the obvious theological differences with Louis Farrakhan, head of the Nation of Islam, who was the leader and guiding spirit of the march.

Storm clouds have prevailed for more than a decade around the alleged invasion of Muslims into arenas formerly dominated and controlled exclusively by Black churches. Government contracts to Muslims to wage war on drugs or to provide security for housing projects have been met with resentment and protests from black Christian ministers and their followers because their growth as a major political force threatened to weaken the stream of government benefits to Black churches as well as shatter relations with external forces forged through years of strategic political interaction.

Organizing activities around the Million Man March was viewed by some ministers as an extension of the Muslim program of invasion and political dilution. If the grassroots goals of the march were realized, control over community resources would become more decentralized, continuing to undermine the effective control over such resources by Black churches (Best 254). Other Black ministers garnered opposition mainly because of their view that support for the march would be interpreted as support for a militant campaign antithetical to the interests of their white allies. This was the prevailing view among conservative Black ministers who served as racial diplomats (Best 254). The response of the church to these efforts provides a key insight into the complexity of Black church politics, and the volatile character of the political terrain of the Black community on a larger scale.

On top of Islam, denominational Black churches in recent times are forced to compete with non-Black congregations as well as parareligious organizations for the time, talents, and financial support of Blacks. Despite the competitive nature of contemporary religious spaces, the Black megachurches that have recently emerged during the cusp of the twentieth century and only grown exponentially since appear to have emerged as nuanced representations of the historic Black Church and heterogeneity found in the Black community (Barnes 20).

The historic Black Church reflected an amalgamation of cultural components from the African and U.S. traditions shaped in response to systemic constraints such as slavery, segregation, and discrimination. In addition to providing a haven from discriminatory practices, the Black Church: helped adherents develop healthy racial identities; served as an area for wholesome cultural, educational, and social activities; was the seat of Black-led activism and self-help initiatives; and created a domain where political leaders and volunteers could be recruited and developed. It is an unforgettably vital organ in the body of Black history in the U.S., and even with the political influences surrounding the nation throughout the years the Black church generally still supported and fostered its community, no matter how divided.

Of equal importance, it served as tangible evidence that Blacks had the fortitude, savvy, and know-how to establish and maintain institutions outside the purview and control of Whites. In addition to continued representation among the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), Baptist, Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), Church of God in Christ (COGIC), Presbyterian, and United Methodist denominations, a growing number of Black churches are nondenominational (19). These latter congregations can retain the organizational benefits of traditional denominations without the bureaucracy or national accountability (Barnes 20).

These black megachurches, however, provide mega programs. Black churches have always emphasized social services. However, now the growing number of predominantly African American megachurches can aggressively expand their outreach and economic development efforts through the media and television in ways that reshape entire communities. Niche programs and cell groups attempt to address secular and spiritual needs of congregants and residents in nearby sectors (18). Such efforts also help hold on to members and attract new ones, likewise practical preaching and uplifting praise draws people to needed programs (18). “Consumerism has changed the rules of the game” (p.17) according to Schaller (2000). And people now expect more from society in general, because of it. Everything becomes a marketable commodity, and churches have evolved to strategically respond to the growth of consumerism.

Christianity has always been used as a tool to increase self-empowerment and deal with issues pertaining to inequality and disenfranchisement. Over time, it evolved into what it is today, a highly marketable commodity. However, throughout America’s history, Christianity was a very marketable product then too, but in a different way. Slave masters were opposed to it at first because of fears of African slave revolts but were convinced Christianity could help them produce obedient and hard-working slaves. In contrast, the slaves saw it as a way to escape the ramifications of the cruel nature of slavery and adopted the religion to establish institutions that could be used to grow the community: economically, socially, and politically.

African Americans’ history with Christianity in the U.S. has been extremely convoluted to say the least. However, it wasn’t just the traditional Euro-American evangelicalism that influenced African Americans, but rather an amalgamation of West/East African religions, Islam and Christian denominations like Baptist and Methodist sects. What made Christianity so effective at being a source of African liberation was its internalization. African slaves essentially

applied what they were taught and created their own distinct, separate institutions that eventually evolved into today's megachurches.

Our views of religion are critically dependent on our understanding of its content, and what we are told about it by external sources. So, ultimately it is up to the individual to come to their own conclusions about a given religion. Instead of being so divided and opposed to the beliefs of our neighbor, we should embrace new ideas and expose ourselves to all sorts of religious ideas. Because through religion, many find *meaning*. And we should be free to learn about various religions to not only gain a better understanding of the world around us but of ourselves as well. In recent years, Christianity in the African American community has become less of a center for growth, and more of a way to divide us. It's imperative that we personalize Christianity for the sake of gaining more wisdom about its true context, and that in academia young learners are exposed to various religions, not only Christianity and its denominations, but Islam, African religions like the Yoruba, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

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