By Thomas R. Frazier*

Changing Perspectives in the Study of Afro-American Religion

The church has been the central institution of the Afro-American community. Black people are incorrigibly religious. Religion is the opiate of the black masses. The black church is but a pale reflection of white Christianity. The black preacher is a protean hustler preying on the credulity of his congregation. The list of cliches is too long to recite in its entirety; so let me just conclude with a couple of quotations from Elmer T. Clark, an authoritative scholar of American religion:

> Evangelistic work among the Negroes [in the antebellum years] was beset with many discouragements owing to the illiteracy, the superstition, and the general backwardness of the slaves. Fresh from the most degraded barbarism, these people were with difficulty made to understand the fundamentals of Christianity. Wildly emotional, their religious services were prone to become mere orgies of unrestrained frenzy. The Negroes did not always connect religion with morality; but they were—and are today—"incurably religious."[1]

But the white missionaries persisted and overcame these difficulties. As the author goes on to say: "The fact is beyond dispute, that the system of slavery took the Negro from the rankest paganism and inured him to the ways of Christian civilization, and the slaves and their descendants are the best specimen of the African race ever developed in the whole course of history."[2]

I realize that it is a little unfair to begin a paper of this sort with a quotation from a book published in 1924, but the fact remains that until the last fifteen years, much of the conventional wisdom as well as the scholarly research differed from this quotation more in tone than in substance. And lest Clark be accused of malice toward his colored brethren, he assures us, believe it or not: "The Christian white man of the South is the Negro's best friend, and has always been."[3] What was that I said about no more cliches?

In this paper I want to suggest some ways in which we can better understand the history of the study of Afro-American religion. Let me make one thing perfectly clear at the outset. This is not intended to be a study of Black religion; it is a study of studies. It is an analysis of published material in the field. To the extent that black religion is occult, as Henry Mitchell and others have insisted, I certainly lay no claim to special knowledge.[4] When material is published, however, I assert my right to analyze that material to the extent of my insight and imagination.

The framework for this paper is drawn from an earlier study, and the

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first part of my presentation will briefly summarize the material found there.[5] The last ten years has seen a veritable camp meeting established in the field. Mass conversions of scholars, black and white, but particularly black, have occurred. Those already at work found the need to rededicate their lives, giving up the old ways and pursuing their new visions down unaccustomed and largely untraveled paths. The second part of my paper will suggest some of the reasons for his great awakening. Most of these are obvious and will require only a brief mention.

The final portion of my presentation will provide illustrations from recent studies which exemplify the changed perspective of the last decade. This may require some modification of the categories outlined in the first part.

In my previous work I attempted to discover the methodological and intellectual presuppositions which tended to control and, I would argue, in many cases distort the results of the research into the nature of Afro-American religion. Without excessive manipulation, the material seemed to fall into four categories. In my study I called these categories: 1) acculturation, 2) assimilation, 3) functionalism, and 4) racial pluralism.

Acculturation refers to the gradual adoption of the religious culture of white Americans by black Americans. It is concerned with African survivals in the religious life of Afro-Americans. It assumes that there is a spectrum running from the "barbarism" referred to by Clark to "normal" Protestantism and is interested in locating the point on that spectrum at which the religious group under consideration is to be found.

Assimilation takes the point of view that the black person is completely American culturally (whatever that means), and that his religion is to be studied simply as a variety of American Protestantism. It should be pointed out, however, that when the word assimilation is used in the context of black-white relations, cultural assimilation alone is usually meant, and a separation between the races based on color alone must be assumed.

The category of functionalism is complex. It includes a necessary distinction between what I call functional theory and functional analysis. The first assumes the unity of the society and studies religion as a way of maintaining that unity; the latter views the different roles religion might play with regard to various sub-systems in the larger society. By far, the largest number of studies fall into this category and almost all of these deal with black religion as accommodative—that is, as being used by blacks and whites to adjust the black person to his subordinate place in American society.

The fourth category I call racial pluralism. By this I mean the study of black religion as a method of helping black people develop a separate, autonomous culture within American society. With one exception, the studies in this category noted in my earlier study were published in the 1960s. It should already be apparent that in the last ten years this category has expanded considerably. We will take specific note of this in the concluding portion of the paper.

The above categories are in roughly chronological order and illustrate

the changing interests of scholars and the changing social climate. We shall see later how well the categories hold up under the scholarly onslaught of the last ten years.

At this point I would like to give examples of the material in each of the categories in an attempt to show how the assumptions tend to control the data and lead in certain cases to significant distortion.

Acculturation. One might expect to find Social Darwinist writings in this category. And sure enough, there they are: In an article in *The Annals* in 1913 which dealt with the subject "The Negro's Progress in Fifty Years," and, more importantly, in a book published in 1905 by F. M. Davenport, a sociologist at Hamilton College. This book's title gives it away: *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals.*[6] The author makes his position clear at the outset: "The doctrine of mental and social evolution is assumed throughout. The world of living men is regarded as in process of development from the animal and the primitive to the rational and the spiritual."[7] As you can anticipate, there is no way Americans of African ancestry can escape under this formula. And they don't. Davenport is not surprised. As he says:

> . . . we would expect to find among the masses of the black people, as we do, many clear marks of their inheritance. Dense ignorance and superstition, a vivid imagination, volatile emotion, a weak will power, small sense of morality, are universally regarded as the most prominent traits of the negro in those sections of the country, notably some parts of the black belt, where he appears in his primitive simplicity.[8]

For Davenport it was the black person's emotional nature which kept him attracted to the church. This might be expected to change in the future but, for the time being, "There has not yet been time enough for more than a superimposition of higher elements upon their inherited mental, social, and religious nature. . . . Civilization and savagery dwell side by side in the same spirit, and the result is often flagrant contradiction in thinking, in feeling, in conduct."[9] This kind of material could be used today for comic relief, if it were not still so widely believed.

W. E. B. DuBois, on the other hand, was a pioneer in his studies of the black church as he was in so many other areas. Although he became personally disenchanted with the church while a student at Fisk, he maintained his interest in the church as a social institution. As a matter of fact he seemed to consider the church as a folk movement of black people rather than a specifically Christian organization. For example, in 1903, he wrote:

> The Negro Church is the only social institution of the Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery; under the leadership of priest or medicine man, afterward of the Christian pastor, the Church preserved in itself the remnants of African tribal life and became after emancipation the center of Negro social life. So that today the Negro population of the United States is virtually divided into church congregations which are the real units of race life.[10]

This notion of the universality of the black church as a folk institution is akin to a theory developed recently by Nelsen, Yokley, and Nelsen. In the introduction to their anthology of readings on the black church, they suggest that it might be useful to see the church as "an involuntary (or at

least semi-involuntary) communal organization that resembles the phenomenon of the 'state church.' "[11]

DuBois was interested in using the African background to provide historical roots for Afro-American institutions where possible to lend stability and autonomy to a people accused of cultural anomie by the larger society. He believed that the black church could be studied as a development with "gradual changes from the heathenism of the Gold Coast to the institutional Negro church of Chicago."[12]

Among early students of the more exotic elements in Afro-American culture, one is enjoying a revival of sorts these days. Newbell N. Puckett's work on folk beliefs, published in 1926, while seriously flawed from both racist and interpretative misconceptions, contains a wealth of empirical data on black folk lore, secular and religious, which has contributed significantly to recent work on black religion.[13] In an article written the same year, Puckett ironically prefigured some of the recent writings in this category by indicating that cultural differences would prevent the slaves from directly copying white Christianity: ". . . our concept of Christianity is largely conditioned by our secular mores, and a people with a background of tribal despotism, polygamy, witchcraft and such would not easily be able to interpret the teachings of the Bible in the same way we do."[14]

Certainly the champion of the acculturationist scholars is Melville J. Herskovits. His work in this area began in the 1920s and reached its climax in 1941 with the publication of *The Myth of the Negro Past,* a work done in conjunction with Gunnar Myrdal's study.[15]

How does one deal with Herskovits briefly? All I will try to do here is point out the significance of the African "myth" for Herskovits' work in Afro-American religion. The stated purpose of *The Myth of The Negro Past* is to challenge that myth, which stated, among other things, that Afro-Americans are a people without a past. Their culture was either destroyed by whites or given up voluntarily by the Africans who were brought to the New World.[16] Herskovits is prepared to argue the contrary. In fact the guiding principle of his work can be stated as follows: Anything that can possibly be construed as an African survival is so construed.

As is well known, most of Herskovits' work elsewhere and in this book dealt with African, Afro-Caribbean, and Latin American regions. His method in this work seems to be: 1) analyze certain religious practices of African tribes, 2) point out parallels in West Indian or Latin American black religion. These New World (but not North American) cultures are admittedly closer to the original African cultures than is the culture of the American black. Then, 3) move suddenly into contemporary American black religious life, where the African traits discussed in 1) and 2) above are now discovered and described. Herskovits calls this method "tracing" the African influences. He then quickly turns on his colleagues with: "As manifestations of African religion are thus systematically traced, the neglect of so many students to allow for the African past in the explanations they offer of aberrant elements in negro religious behavior

in the United States is seen to make a sorry chapter in the history of scholarly procedure."[17]

Even though I suggest in my comments above that Herskovits found survivals where there were none, he also found survivals, and his attack on his colleagues is well taken. Increasingly today, in ways which I will indicate later, his admonition is being taken to heart, both within his own discipline of anthropology and elsewhere. We are certainly in his debt for a serious attempt to account for the positive elements of the African cultural ancestry in Afro-American life. He turned the myth of the Negro past on its head and continued the process begun by DuBois and others of trying to make black Americans see that this African ancestry should be a source of pride, not shame.

Assimilation. As used here, this point of view finds scholarly support in Kenneth Stampp's statement from the introduction to his book on the institution of slavery: "I have assumed that the slaves were merely ordinary human beings, that innately Negroes *are,* after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less."[18]

The two leading scholars in this category are E. Franklin Frazier and Joseph R. Washington, Jr. Although Washington keeps writing to say that he didn't really mean what people thought he meant in his last work, his basic assimilationist position remains unchanged, as we will see later.

Frazier's untimely death prevented him from writing a major work on the black church. His slim volume, *The Negro Church in America,* was based on lectures he gave at the University of Liverpool in 1953 and was clearly intended to be a prolegomenon to a larger work.[19] Therefore, it is fragmentary and incomplete. But it is unlikely that Frazier's basic position would have changed.

One idea for which Frazier is widely known and which influences his position on black religion is his opposition to the notion that elements of African culture survived the experience of slavery. He forthrightly opposed the acculturationist position described above. In his chapter on the black church in his book *The Negro in the United States,* Frazier states:

> From the scanty and fragmentary report on the religious behavior of the imported Negro slaves, it would be difficult to establish any connections between African priests and the preachers on the plantations. It would be even more difficult to establish any relation between African religious practices and the Negro church which developed on American soil. It appears from the historical evidence that the religion of the American Negro and his church organization grew out of his experience on American soil.[20]

It is clear from all his work that Frazier is concerned with eliminating any barriers which separate black Americans from full participation in the larger society. He rejects the need for a racially separate society while seeing the value of certain black institutions as transitional. He recognizes, while lamenting, the necessity of certain institutions which provide temporary relief from difficult circumstances. For example, he says that: "Various cults and sects have sprung up in answer to the mental and moral conflicts of the frustrated and disillusioned (urban) migrants."[21] But there is nothing racial about this condition, he would insist.

In his book on the black church, Frazier attempts some functional analysis, but even in his description of the camp meetings, he strives for an assimilationist perspective:

> . . . The Baptist and Methodist preachers, who lacked the education of the ministers of the Anglican Church, appealed to the poor and the ignorant and the outcast. In the crowds that attended the revivals and camp meetings there were numbers of Negroes who found in the fiery message of salvation a hope and a prospect of escape from their earthly woes. Moreover, the emphasis which the preachers placed upon feeling as a sign of conversion found a ready response in the slaves who were repressed in so many ways. . . . In the emotionalism of the camp meetings and revivals some social solidarity, even if temporary, was achieved, and they were drawn into a union with their fellow men.[22]

As Frazier develops his theory of the history of the black church in this country, one can see emerging his hostile attitude toward this institution. He feels that as long as the church holds sway over the lives of black Americans, so long will they be denied access to full integration into American society. This accounts for his widely quoted remark: "When one comes to the Negro church, which is the most important cultural institution created by Negroes, one encounters the most important institutional barrier to integration and the assimilation of Negroes."[23]

The provocative and controversial influence of Joseph R. Washington, Jr. began with the publication of his book *Black Religion* in 1963.[24] The most important insight of that work was the division of the black religious community into two groups: the folk religious community and the black church. For Washington, black folk religion constitutes the fifth great religion of the United States, the others being Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and secularism. There is no place here for the black "church." So far as the black church is "church," it has no meaningful existence apart from the white church. It is this attitude which causes Washington to be listed with the assimilationists. Black folk religion, on the other hand, has a separate basis.

> Negro folk religion is deeply involved in one area of Christianity, the ethic of love—justice—equality, about which they have learned from people other than white Protestants. The Negro folk religion is fundamentally and unequivocally dedicated to freedom, independence, and the rise of Negroes to equal status in the society. The "genius" of the Negro folk religion is not the "church" but the use of this structure as an instrument for the fulfillment of its participation as a race in every area of life.[25]

From this promising beginning, quite influential in the past decade, Washington vitiates his insight by criticizing folk religion as theologically inadequate: "Instead of the Christian faith, the principle of love keeps black religion alive. This unfortunate fact is a deterrent to the full participation of the Negro (as a whole people) in the mainstream of the church universal and the American culture."[26]

An unfortunate assumption which causes Washington to misunderstand certain aspects of black religion is his idealization of the white church as a theologically sophisticated institution. This leads him to denigrate the black religious tradition unnecessarily:

> Negro Christians certainly affirm with other Christians the Lordship of Jesus Christ, but that this affirmation has little of the binding significance it holds for white Christians

is indisputable; it is also *prima facie* evidence of theological poverty and the destitute state of faith among Negro Christians.[27]

Almost every scholar who cites Washington approvingly on the folk tradition points out that he has changed his mind later on the other points. We will return to him in the conclusion and evaluate his present position.

Among the other assimilationist writings are three on the rural black church in the South.[28] The main import of these studies is that things are difficult in the countryside but with effort, the black churches and ministers can strive to reach the norms of the white rural churches of the major denominations. To indicate the weakness of this approach, let me note that one of these books, published in 1947, includes a survey of the attitudes of rural black ministers on the quality of race relations in their communities. Of the one hundred and five ministers who responded, eighty-three said race relations were good, twenty-one said fair, and only one said that they were bad.[29] Perhaps there should have been a follow-up interview with that last one.

Functionalism. The study of the role or "function" of religion in the social system has become perhaps the most widespread frame of reference for professional social scientists in this field. It is important to distinguish clearly, however, the two aspects of functionalism: functional theory and functional analysis. Thomas O'Dea explicates the former:

> As a frame of reference for empirical research, functional theory sees society as an ongoing equilibrium of social institutions which pattern human activity in terms of shared norms, held to be legitimate and binding by the human participants themselves. This complex of institutions, which as a whole constitutes the social system, is such that each part (each institutional element) is interdependent with all the other parts, and that changes in any part affect the others, and the condition of the system as a whole.[30]

But the study of the role religion plays in society need not assume a functional theory about the society. In functional analysis the focus is on the way religion operates to serve certain needs of the individual and the society. Perhaps the most useful statement on this point comes from the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn: "A given bit of culture is 'functional' insofar as it defines a mode of response which is adaptive from the standpoint of the society or adaptive and adjustive from the standpoint of the individual."[31] Most of the studies to follow in this category use Kluckhohn's terms of analysis.

Before dealing with the studies using functional analysis, however, I would like to pay brief attention to a work which attempted to evaluate its material with functional theory. This otherwise valuable book is C. Eric Lincoln's study of the Nation of Islam.[32] In the interpretive section of his book, Lincoln tries to apply functional theory and the results are less than successful. For example, he says:

> A functional group is one that reinforces not the status quo, whatever that happens to be, but the organic unity of the society. Segregation is a dysfunctional part of America's status quo, though our irresistible trend is toward integration. In siding with the disease against the cure, the Muslims are profoundly and decisively dysfunctional both to the Negro community and to the society as a whole.[33]

Although Lincoln has earlier in this section of his book pointed out several positive functions for the Muslims themselves, he seems overly concerned for the society and vitiates his analysis by focusing on the dysfunctions for society. He points out that Muslim behavior may cause whites to increase racial barriers, that attacks on Christianity increase social discord, and that "a deliberate policy of segregation is always dysfunctional, regardless of its source."[34] Lincoln himself must have been dissatisfied with this section of his book because he drops the entire functionalism portion in the revised edition published in 1973 and presents an entirely different interpretive framework in his new introduction to that edition.

By far the largest number of studies of black religion fall into the category of functional analysis. And almost all these view the primary function of black religion as an accommodative device. According to John Dollard:

> Accommodation attitudes are those which enable the Negro to adjust and survive in the caste situation as it is presented to him. Originally the alternatives to accommodation were successful conflict with the whites or extinction. There was little prospect of success in conflict, as the occasional slave revolts demonstrated. The desire to live was strong, so that the only alternative was adjustment to the situation.[35]

With this attitude in mind, the dozens of accommodative studies can only be hinted at here. The studies actually fall into three groups: 1) General surveys of black life and religion, 2) Analysis of urban cults, and 3) Community studies of Southern towns. In the material to follow I will list the major studies in each section and provide an example or two from each group.

In the category of general surveys, we find the following: Mays and Nicholson's *The Negro Church,* Myrdal's *An American Dilemma,* Simpson and Yinger's *Racial and Cultural Minorities,* and a little known but excellent essay by Norval Glenn, "Negro Religion and Negro Status in the United States."[36]

The accommodative position in Mays and Nicholson is stated on page one: "Possibly the most significant technique of survival developed during the days of slavery might well be called a 'religious technique,' which is represented by the Negro spirituals and by the early efforts to establish and develop the Negro church." [37] According to the authors, the church has its preeminent position in the black community because black people had been largely excluded from the civic and institutional life of the general American culture.[38]

Myrdal's attitude toward the role of the black church in the community can be stated as follows:

> When discussing the Negro church as it is and as it might come to be, it must never be forgotten that the *Negro Church fundamentally is an expression of the Negro community itself.* If the church has been otherworldly in outlook and indulged in emotional ecstasy, it is primarily because the downtrodden common Negroes have craved religious escape from poverty and other tribulations. If the preachers have been timid and pussyfooting, it is because Negroes in general have condoned such a policy and would have feared radical leaders . . . . When the Negro community changes, the church also will change.[39]

Indeed, Myrdal quotes a black Minister in a large southern city to this effect: " 'We are the policemen of the Negroes. If we did not keep down their ambitions and divert them into religion, there would be upheaval in the South.' " [40]

Using Kluckhohn's terms, Simpson and Yinger list the functions of black religion. These are: "self-expression, entertainment and recreation, adjustment to life crises, economic and otherworld compensations. These functions have had adjustive value for individual Negroes and adaptive (survival) value for the Negro group." [41] In their analysis Simpson and Yinger quote Mays and Nicholson extensively. Functionalists often feed on each other's work.

The work of the first group of functionalists can be summed up by the following quotation from Glenn's essay:

> Many Negro religious beliefs and practices are, among other things, aids to adaptation to a subordinate status. Although Negro religion serves many of the same social and individual needs that are served by the religion of other people, it has in addition served a number of needs that grew out of discrimination, prejudice, and the initially inferior status of American Negroes.[42]

Well, by now you have the picture. The remainder of the studies in the other functionalist categories apply the accommodative principle in specific contexts. In the case of urban cults, the still standard work is by A. H. Fauset.[43] According to many observers of the urban scene, a double accommodative function is at work there, adjusting the black ghetto dweller both to the urban scene and to his subordinate but unstable racial status. In describing the plight of the black immigrant to the cities, Fauset indicates that

> . . . one is led to believe that, for many of their members, certain religious cults in northern urban communities assist the transplanted southern worshipper, accustomed to the fixed racial mores and caste requirements of the South, to adjust his psychological and emotional reactions to conditions in the North, where all life and living are more fluid and intermingling of the races is inevitable.[44]

Other studies in this section apply this kind of analysis to the movements of Father Divine, Daddy Grace, and a variety of holiness groups.[45]

The last group of accommodative studies to be surveyed includes the well-known studies of Southern black communities that were undertaken in the 30s, 40s, and 50s by leading anthropologists, sociologists, and social psychologists. Among these are the works by Charles S. Johnson, John Dollard, Hortense Powdermaker, Hylan Lewis, and Allison Davis and associates.[46] Since all of these social scientists were engaged in field study in the South during the period of thoroughgoing segregation, one is not surprised to find them explicating the accommodative function of religion for the blacks there. Perhaps a selection from Johnson's work can stand as an example of this group, all of whom found about what they expected to find.

> The religious emotions of the people demand some channel of formal expression, and find it in the church. But more than this, the church is the most important center of face-to-face relations. It is in a very real sense a social institution. It provides a large

> measure of the recreation and relaxation from the physical stress of life. It is the agency looked to for aid when misfortune overtakes a person. It offers the medium for a community feeling, singing together, eating together, praying together and indulging in the formal expressions of fellowship. Above this it holds out a world of escape from the hard experiences of life common to all. It is the agency which holds together the sub-committees and families physically scattered over a wide area. It exercises some influence over social relations, settings up certain regulations for behavior, passing judgments which represent community opinion, censuring and penalizing improper conduct by expulsion.[47]

According to all of the functionalist scholars, the church could only provide the kind of service to the black community described by Johnson if it adopted an accommodationist posture. One might well ask if this had to be the case. But one can only ask; as far as the research indicates, this was the case. Powdermaker asks this question and gives an answer which includes an individual function which must not be overlooked or the value of which must not be underestimated. Let this stand as the conclusion of the section on functionalism:

> In both its secular and its religious character, [the Negro Church] serves as an antidote, a palliative, an escape. Not one of these functions is designed to deny or to change the facts: each makes them easier to bear. By helping the Negro to endure the *status quo,* this institution has been a conservative force, tending to relieve and counteract the discontents that make for rebellion. At the same time the equally vital function of maintaining the self respect of the Negro individual is by no means a conservative one.[48]

Racial Pluralism. A key to understanding the point of view I am here calling racial pluralism can be found in a "Memorandum on the Study of Acculturation" prepared by three leading anthropologists.[49] There they suggest that one of the results of acculturation is:

> Reaction: where because of aggression, or because of the unforeseen results of the acceptance of foreign traits, contra-acculturative movements arise; these maintaining their psychological force (a) as compensations for an imposed or assumed inferiority, or (b) through the prestige which a return to older pre-acculturative conditions may bring to those participating in such a movement.[50]

An emphasis on contra-acculturation, then, can be said to be a mark of the position of racial pluralism. We will expect to see a stress on racial pride and the maintaining of racial identity. If acculturation means, in this context, the adoption of the culture of the dominant society in the larger social system, contra-acculturation refers to the deliberate attempt to retain the older cultural heritage. In the case of Afro-American religion, we would expect to see a stress on the racial ancestors of the blacks, that is, Africa, or, perhaps, simply a maintenance of the separation which has been forced upon blacks in American society but without the acceptance of subordinate status.

As I indicated in my earlier remarks, this category was just beginning to appear when I did the original study. The only significant earlier writing I put into this category (and I wasn't completely sure of my choice) was St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's study of blacks in Chicago.[51] There are clearly accommodationist motifs in this work, but the authors place an overlay on the data (which is not always borne out by the data) that suggests that they see the church as providing race leadership. They indicate that their informants often judge the church solely on the basis of

whether it is "advancing the race." I believe Drake and Cayton see the place of the black church as one of developing a separate and vital culture that, on the one hand, accommodates its members to the realities of racial living in America, but, on the other and more important hand, provides blacks with a way of life that can enable them to live full lives without participating in the institutions of the dominant white society which are more readily available to them in a Northern city.

It is important to point out in this connection that all of the studies in this section deal with religious life in Northern cities. And with the exception of Drake and Cayton, are primarily concerned with non-Christian cults. Here we will look at two studies of the Black Muslims and one of Black Jews. It is clear in these cases that the contra-acculturation referred to above is at work.

The first of the Muslim studies uses Anthony F. C. Wallace's theory of revitalization movements and applies it to the Nation of Islam. A revitalization movement is defined by Laue as a "deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture."[52] Without going into the complex and detailed structure of a revitalization movement, let me just suggest some of the applications of the theory to the Muslim movement. Laue indicates, for example, that the Muslims reject: "the white slave-master and his evil system, which will be replaced by an all-black nation-within–a–nation—in which contact with the white's alien customs and values is neither desirable nor possible."[53] The idea of a nation-within-a-nation is typical of racial pluralism. The nation concept implies, if not equality of power, at least equality of status. And the Muslims offer not only a new nationality, but a completely new identity, including a new name, new life style, new associations, new theology, and not least, a new heaven and a new earth.

The most valuable study of the Muslims we have is by a Nigerian political scientist, E. U. Essien-Udom.[54] He presents the Muslims as an example of a black nationalist movement. Nationalism, for Essien-Udom

> May be thought of as the belief of a group that it possesses, or ought to possess, a country; that it shares, or ought to share, a common heritage of language, culture, and religion, and that its heritage, way of life, and ethnic identity are distinct from those of other groups. Nationalists believe that they ought to rule themselves and shape their own destinies, and that they should therefore be in control of their social, economic, and political institutions.[55]

Essien-Udom recognizes that "black" nationalism as he is using the term, does not conform to this ideal-type definition. Most nationalism has a territorial base, admits the author, but the black nationalists live in the midst of an alien society with no real geographical region as its heritage. The nationalism of the Black Muslims has caused them to place their geographical antecedents in "Arabian civilization," primarily located in ancient Egypt. This movement is unusual also, as nationalisms go, because it has not produced a specific geographical location for its future home. It has, rather, placed its homeland in the eschatological future.[56] The nation is a spiritual nation. And in this analysis it exemplifies racial pluralism with a vengeance.

The last study to be considered in this section of the paper is by Howard Brotz and deals with a New York city cult called the Commandment Keepers Congregation of the Living God, better known as the Black Jews.[57] For Brotz, the Black Jews represent an attempt by one group of black Americans to develop themselves separately from the broader institutions of the society. They will exist to themselves in as many ways as they can. And, like the Muslims, they have built a myth on which to base this separateness. As a result, Brotz points out, "In terms of this myth they have a new conception of themselves as no longer despised pariahs but rather as the chosen people, with a proud past and a triumphant future." [58]

In the concluding portion of this paper we will see how the category of racial pluralism has become the dominant analytical framework for studies of black religion in the last decade. Before we get to the recent studies, however, I want to suggest a variety of reasons for the well-nigh revolutionary changes in the interpretation of black religion since 1967.

I can do no more here than mention some of the vast changes that have taken place in the past fifteen years which have influenced the new work on black religion. There are at least four areas in which these changes have occurred: 1) in the society at large, 2) in the black community, 3) in the black church, and 4) in the scholarly community.

In the society at large, of course, there seems to be a greater stress on pluralism generally and a rejection of the idea that there is some general cultural norm to which all Americans should strive to conform. There is a greater toleration and a greater interest in cultural diversity, including religious variety.

The changes in the black community are so far-reaching I will only point out those which seem to bear directly on our subject. Among these are the Civil Rights movement, the influence of separatist religious leaders like Malcolm X and Albert Cleage, and the Black Studies movement which explored in so many new ways the roots of black life and culture in the United States. Particularly important for our purposes was a growing interest in the history and culture of Africa and Afro-Caribbean areas.

The changes in the black church itself have had a tremendous impact on the study of black religion. Some of the most significant writing in this field recently has been done by churchmen themselves, or scholars actively involved in church life. The movement for a black church which began in the 60's and continues today, includes such groups as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Conference of Black Churchmen, and the black caucuses in major denominations which are predominantly white. Black scholars influenced by the movement have looked more deeply than before into the religious history of their own traditions and found there ideas and experiences which help form the framework for a new analysis. Not insignificant in this connection, and something which will surely have increasing influence in the field, is the black liberation theology developed by James Cone and others.

Finally there are changes in scholarship in the field of religious studies.

Increasingly in studies of American religion, as is the case in American history generally, the consensus view of the past is giving way to a consideration of the variety of religious expression in American history. Anthropologists, perhaps because they are no longer being funded by the C.I.A., have turned their attention homeward and are increasingly investigating both mainstream and marginal religious movements. More and more, scholars of American religion are looking at the things that differ in comparing religious movements rather than searching for similarities. This attitude promises much in an attempt to understand black religion in America.

Let us now take a look at the four categories of interpretation described above and see how the new scholarship fits.

Acculturation. The definition of acculturation which was used in the initial portion of this paper undergoes a slight alteration under the impact of the new studies. No longer does the continuum run from "barbarism" to "normal" Protestantism. There is no more "normal" Protestantism, but there is still a continuum. The recent work which deals with African survivals is more interested in identifying the continuities and their place in black religious life.

The boldest essays in this area are the two books by Henry Mitchell, a black pastor turned theological professor.[59] Both *Black Preaching* and *Black Belief* are concerned with exploring the differences between black and white religious practices. For Mitchell, the differences are rooted in the separate sources of religious tradition. "It is far more accurate," Mitchell states, "to speak of Blackamerican Christianity as a point on a continuum beginning in Africa, than to speak of it as the direct descendant of a tradition beginning in Athens or Rome, or, for that matter, in England."[60] Shades of DuBois! The influence of the changing attitude toward African culture can be seen in the following quotation, directly influenced by the work of John Mbiti:[61] "The African world view was not recognized as such because it was so nearly identical with the Judaeo-Christian view, and because it was automatically assumed that religious views as high as this must have come from whites, not from 'pagan' Africans."[62] Much of the empirical data in Mitchell's work is quite controversial but needn't concern us here. What is important for our purposes is that he sees the genius of black Christianity to be a result of its African roots.

Another scholar influenced by Mbiti and others like him is Leonard Barrett. In his work on the Africa heritage in New World religion, Barrett, like Herskovits before him, deals primarily with Afro-Caribbean and Latin American religions. The only major exception is a chapter on the Garvey movement. But in his concluding pages he comments on recent developments in the black church of North America. There he places himself firmly in the acculturationist camp with overtones of racial pluralism: "Contemporary Black theology . . . is rightfully understood as primarily a reconstruction of the collective unconscious of African peoples."[63] More empirically, he points out that the religious dimensions of the Garvey movement are too often overlooked. He sees the UNIA as

"a mixture of high-church, Baptist and African festivals."[64]

The acculturationist perspective is also applied in two works on the history of slavery, by John Blassingame and Gerald Mullin[65]—in an effort to account for both resistance and rebellion.

An example of the new anthropology is found in Morton Marks' study of "Ritual Structures in Afro-American Music"[66] published in the epic collection of recent work in anthropology of religion edited by Zaretsky and Leone. In that work Mark compares certain aspects of the Brazilian carnival performance, New York Afro-Cuban music, and black gospel singing in a successful search for Africanisms. We can expect to see more and increasingly sophisticated comparative studies of this sort.

Assimilation: This is no longer an issue for scholars of black religion. The only possible exception to this is in the latest work of Joseph Washington, Jr. Washington is always difficult to pin down. While much of his book on sects and cults provides an old-fashioned functional analysis, the following apparently contradictory quotations illustrate the difficulty with which one approaches Washington's work:

> Thus, what is African in black folk religion is not any unique religious phenomena, doctrine, rituals, beliefs, or even the will to ethnic community or communalism. What is African is simply the identity of a people who in common racial humiliation find themselves and seek power to affect their lives. What is Christian is the demand for communion with God in community with man. Black folk religion, then, combines the suffering of African descent with the hope of Christian understanding in the quest for power in the only way in which makes it a constant task—the black *cult* worship of the power of God for the power of the black men and thus all men.[67]

Assimilationist, right? But compare this with the following:

> The special character of [black religion] is not its content but its intent, for the [religion] is a synthesis of Western Christianity's beliefs, practices, ceremonies, rituals, and theologies with the African tradition of religion as permeating all dimensions of life, without final distinction between the sacred and the secular. The intent of [black religion] is that of traditional African religions—the seeking of the power or spirit of God in all times, places, and things because without that power, man is powerless.[68]

O.K., you figure it out, as we move on to the next category.

Functionalism. Many of the studies of recent years contain elements of functional analysis. But this dimension is played down as new emphases have emerged. Although we can expect functionalist studies to continue to appear, we can also expect that they will broaden their analysis to include more than the dominant accommodative perspective of the past. For an example of the new type, see the study of black Jehovah's Witnesses by Lee R. Cooper in the Zaretsky and Leone collection.[69]

Racial pluralism. I have already indicated that this is the direction in which studies of black religion are going. The reasons for this are obvious. Vincent Harding sounds the keynote for this development when he points out that it has become necessary for blacks to make whites irrelevant in the struggle to build the black community as a community of love. In this connection he quotes Julius Lester to the effect that: "At one time black people desperately wanted to be American, to communicate with whites, to live in the Beloved Community. Now that is irrelevant. They know that

it can't be until whites want it to be, and it is obvious now that whites don't want it."[70]

Harding sees the church of black power in the following terms:

> Not only does it begin to fill the need for personal commitment and a sense of fellowship with other similarly committed black persons; it also embodies impressive social concern, a call for ultimate justice, and a search to be present with the sufferers of the society. Gladly identifying with the oppressed beyond national borders, this church increasingly seeks to glorify at least that part of God which may reside in black folk.[71]

The most extensive survey of black religion yet published comes out of this new emphasis on racial pluralism and black equality. Gayraud S. Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* is a history of Afro-American religion from Africa to the 1970's. It is clearly intended as an attack on the assimilationist position. He states his thesis as follows:

> An exceedingly elastic but tenacious thread binds together the contributive and developmental factors of black religion in the United States as one distinctive social phenomenon. It is the thread of what may be called, if properly defined, 'Black Radicalism.' Black religion has always concerned itself with the fascination of an incorrigibly religious people with the mystery of God, but it has been equally concerned with the yearning of a despised and subjugated people with the freedom of man—freedom from the religious, economic, social and political domination which white men have exercised over Black men since the beginning of the African Slave trade. It is this radical thrust of Black people for human liberation expressed in theological terms and religious institutions which is the defining characteristic of black unity and of Black religion in the United States, from the preacher-led slave revolts to the Black Manifesto of James Forman and the 1970 'Black Declaration of Independence' of the National Committee of Black Churchmen.[72]

Wilmore's work is an exciting, thorough, original, provocative and controversial study. I recommend it without hesitation as a magisterial effort for which we should all be grateful.

Earlier in my paper I pointed out that C. Eric Lincoln dropped the functionalist portion of his book on the Nation of Islam in the revised edition. His new introduction provides a useful methodology for analyzing black religion from the perspective of racial pluralism. He now calls the Muslims a "protest movement" and draws on the sociology of conflict for his theoretical framework.[73] While he still doesn't seem to like the Muslims much, at least now he is better able to understand and analyze why they act like they do.

Empirical substantiation for the position of racial pluralism is provided in a book misleadingly entitled *Black Church in the Sixties* by Hart and Anne Nelsen. Their survey data "emphasizes the importance of the black church as a base for building a sense of ethnic identity and a community of interest among its members."[74] Their conclusions are drawn from an analysis of Gallup Poll data on church attendance and attitudes toward the church's speaking out on racial issues and of ministers getting involved in racial or political protest movements.

In concluding this consideration of studies of black religion, I would like to call attention to the work of a thoroughly secular historian of slavery. In my opinion, the section on religion in Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* is the most original contribution of the overall work, and the most satisfactory treatment of the religion of the slaves we have

available. Since I am dealing with this material elsewhere suffice it to say here that in developing his crucial notion of the cultural autonomy created for themselves by the slaves in ante-bellum America, Genovese argues that religion played the dominant role in that process. One example:

> The social significance of voodoo and conjure among the slaves lay less in some direct threat to the whites, much less in their alleged use by whites to control blacks, than in the degree of autonomy they provided the quarters. The slaves saw other slaves with great power, and by that belief alone they offered resistance to that doctrine of black impotence which the slaveholders worked incessantly to fasten on them.[75]

Speaking of voodoo and conjure, I would like to close this essay by quoting a poem by Ishmael Reed, a black writer who has developed what he calls a "neo-hoodoo aesthetic" out of which he has written such occult novels as *Mumbo-Jumbo* and *Flight to Canada.*

SERMONETTE

a poet was busted by a topless judge
his friends went to morristwn nj & put
black powder on his honah's doorstop
black powder into his honah's car
black powder on his honah's briefs
tiny dolls into his honah's mind

by nightfall his honah could a go go no mo
his dog went crazy & ran into a crocodile
his widow fell from a wall &
hanged herself
his daughter was run over by a black man
cming home for the wakes the two boys
skidded into mourning
all the next of kin's teeth fell out

gimmie dat ol time
religion
it's good enough
for me![76]

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5. Thomas R. Frazier, "An Analysis of Social Scientific Writing on American Negro Religion" (unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1967).
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7. Davenport, *op. cit.*, p. vii.
8. *Ibid.,* p. 45.
9. *Ibid.,* p. 46.
10. W. E. B. DuBois (ed.), *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903), p. ii.

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12. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 142. First published in 1903.
13. Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926).
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22. Frazier, *The Negro Church in America,* pp. 8f.
23. *Ibid.,* pp. 70f.
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26. *Ibid.,* p. 29.
27. *Ibid.,* p. 140.
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30. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 2.
31. Clyde Kluckhohn, quoted in J. Milton Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1957), p. 361.
32. C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).
33. *Ibid.,* p. 252.
34. *Ibid.,* p. 251f.
35. John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), p. 250. First published in 1937.
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