

A Phenomenological Note: Black Religion As Christian Conjunction

CONTENTS

- I. The Phenomenon: A Biographical Introduction
- II. Conjuring God for Freedom: A Black Religious Tradition
- III. The Inner Dynamism: Style Switching in Religion and Culture
- IV. An Afro-Christian Synthesis: The Analogy of Spirit Possession

This essay presents a view of Black religious expression as a distinctive form of Christian conjunction. I will say more about what this means shortly. But for introductory purposes I should immediately add that this is a phenomenological presentation. By "phenomenological" I mean a description of this occurrence as it 'gives itself' in actual experience, prior to any attempt to schematize or classify it. Thus I intend to 'bracket' all valuational or categorical considerations, such as whether this form of conjunction represents "high" or "low" religion (a preoccupation common to investigators in comparative religion when confronted with African derived spiritualities). Similarly, I will resist—perhaps unsuccessfully—any pressure to locate this phenomenon in relation to the Christian dogma (a premature consideration whenever systematic theologians and religious thinkers seek to organize occurrences without first allowing the phenomenon to reveal its inner dynamism).

Nevertheless I will be concerned to demonstrate that, phenomenologically, this form of conjunction is indeed "Christian" or at least not antithetical to Christian spirituality. Such demonstrations are not necessarily theological, but remain a phenomenological task insofar as the criteria (for determining Christian authenticity) are merely experiential. In a similar way the criteria for determining the Christian authenticity of classical spiritualities are partly experiential. For example, the contemplative doctrine of the three ways—that Roman Catholic and Orthodox teaching which divides the spiritual journey into three distinct stages

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called purgation, illumination, and union with God—partly requires psychological, moral, and similar experiential data for authentication. But, of course, there are other criteria for determining such authenticity. They are theological rather than phenomenological. The theological dimension is precisely that which transforms, transvaluates, and transcends experience. Such theological criteria can tell for or against the authenticity of any spirituality, whether classical or—in the following terms—'conjugalional.'

But our phenomenological task is not concerned with the theological criteria for authenticity. Given the nature of this essay, the most that can be shown is that there are no theoretical grounds for excluding a spirituality of conjuration from Christian theology. A demonstration of this claim will occur in the concluding section of the essay. There I will use the analogy of spirit possession in the Black church to show how conjuration, like 'Holy Ghost baptism,' can also constitute a genuine Afro-Christian synthesis. But first we proceed to three preliminary sections. Each of these will detail the nature and dynamics of this spirituality in the history of Black religious experience. Section one presents a biographical instance of conjuration from the life and writings of the great scholar, W. E. B. DuBois (1868-1963). Section two will examine the freedom role of this spirituality in Black American history, primarily as conveyed in the anti-slavery publication (1829) of David Walker and Robert Alexander. Section three will explore the inner dynamism of the phenomenon as a spirituality which still operates in both traditional Black religion and in contemporary culture according to interpretations of Gayraud S. Wilmore and Henry H. Mitchell.

I. The Phenomenon: A Biographical Introduction

One summer night in a Southern backwoods Black church, the young W. E. B. Dubois witnessed for the first time an event of ecstatic worship. He was shocked by the experience. His Puritan youth in a quiet New England town had in no way prepared him for forms of worship that included religious ecstasy. At the time he was a young college student, teaching in the South while between terms at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Even the presence of large numbers of Black people was new for him, and he later acknowledged that, upon arrival at Fisk, "I was thrilled to be for the first time among so many people of my own color or rather of such various and extraordinary colors, which I had only glimpsed before, but who it seemed were bound to me by new and exciting and eternal ties." [1968:107]

Given this acknowledgement by the older DuBois, is it possible that he was not simply shocked by that summer night of religious ecstasy? Indeed, is it possible that he was at the same time strangely attracted?

I had never seen a Southern Negro revival. To be sure, we in Berkshire were 'not perhaps as stiff and formal as they in Suffolk of olden time; yet we were very quiet and subdued, and I know not what would have happened those clear, sabbath mornings had someone punctuated the sermon with a scream, or interrupted the long prayer with a loud Amen!

And so most striking to me . . . was the air of intense excitement that possessed that mass of black folk. A sort of suppressed terror hung in the air and seemed to seize them,—a pythian madness, a demoniac possession, that lent terrible reality to song and word . . . the people moaned and fluttered, and then the gaunt-cheeked brown woman beside me suddenly leaped straight into the air and shrieked like a lost soul, while round about came wail and groan and outcry, and a sense of human passion such as I had never conceived before. [120]

Arnold Rampersad has also highlighted that summer night of 1886 in the book, *The Art and imagination of W. E. B. DuBois* (1976). In fact, Rampersad identifies DuBois' whole summer's experience in the South as a turning point of self-realization for the young thinker. But Rampersad also goes further by suggesting the psychological implication of DuBois' reaction of "shock": "After the restraining Congregationalism of Great Barrington, he was shocked by the emotional spontaneity of black worship. His first experience moved and troubled him. . . . He knew that he could never be an active participant in such religious drama; he stood outside the folk, a psychic mulato, an intellectual." [1976:14]

But was DuBois really this type of intellectual—so thoroughly estranged from the supra-rational sources of his people's ethnicity that he could not enter into their religious ecstasies? On the contrary, perhaps his own spiritual life was secretly influenced by the compelling drama and catharsis of that summer night. Indeed, we may conjecture that however repelled he was by the ecstatic vigor of Black religious expression, DuBois also internalized or introjected this folk spirituality by becoming, himself, an "intellectual conjuror"! Over against the epithet of "psychic mullato" we can place the conjurational quality of DuBois' literary work—that is, the incantatory rhetoric of his verse, of his scholarly lectures and his race propaganda. All this may be perceived as linking the scholar more profoundly to the deep structures of Black religious expression.

That religious expression is properly described as conjurational whenever it involves the practice of summoning, evoking, or designating a divine being for the benefit of human existence. Immediately in the next section we proceed to clarify this sense of the term. But here our main effort has been to identify the phenomenon under study. Perhaps this introductory effort can be completed by presenting a brief literary instance of DuBois' conjuration.

Race groups are striving, each in its own way, to develop for civilization its particular message, its particular ideal, which shall help to guide the world nearer and nearer that perfection of human life for which we all long, that "one far off Divine event." . .

Manifestly some of the great races of today—particularly the Negro race—have not as yet given to civilization the full spiritual message which they are capable of giving.

...

No people that laughs at itself, and ridicules itself, and wishes to God it was anything but itself ever wrote its name in history; it must be inspired with the Divine faith of our black mothers, that out of the blood and dust of battle will march a victorious host, a mighty nation, a peculiar people, to speak to the nations of earth a Divine truth that shall make them free. [(1897) 1970:78-82]

We should note that this celebrated passage, which has also been described as an instance of Dr. DuBois' Black messianism [Moses, 1982:171-172], is not only a rhetorical attempt to exhort "the Negro race" toward greatness. In the terms of this essay, it is also a spiritual attempt to conjure God for 'a Divine truth that shall make them free.'

II. Conjuring God for Freedom: A Black Religious Tradition

In his 1961 study of "the new African culture," Jahnheinz Jahn presents conjuration as a distinctively African tradition of "active worship" which "creates" God, and which "installs the divine being as such . . ." [219] The relationship between the act of worship and the practice of "conjuring" is stated by Jahn in the following manner: "Analogously to the designation of an image we may speak of the designation of divinity." This formulation suggests that in such worship a deity is conjured (summoned, evoked) in ways analogous to the imaging or imagining of a designated object. In its original context of religious ritual this imaging or designating of the deity occurs for the sake of worship. But under the exigences of historical experience conjuration may acquire some intention other than the ritual act of worship. In the present section we will elaborate the claim that this has occurred in the Black religious experience. That is, a development has occurred in Afro-American history from the religious intent to conjure God for worship, to a religious intent to conjure God for freedom.

The best places to verify such a development are writings in which religious expressions function rhetorically like ritual incantations. For our purposes the "Ethiopian" texts of David Walker and Robert Alexander Young are exemplary. These 1829 anti-slavery texts are called Ethiopian because they depend on a biblical verse in which that African name figured prominently:

Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God.
[Psalm 68.31]

But what is significant for our purposes are the prophetic implications which early Black Christians discerned in this verse, and the literary-religious tradition which they developed from it. This was a tradition which originated in those nineteenth century movements to colonize Af-

rica using Afro-American missionaries. The Ethiopian influence could still be detected in our century, not only in the Garvey movement of the 1920s, but also in the Pan-African movements of Black nationalism following the second world war. "Ethiopianism" is the name given to this tradition; a "literary-religious tradition common to English-speaking Africans, regardless of nationality." [Moses, 1975:411]

The importance of this tradition—in terms of conjuring God for freedom—can best be appreciated by observing both the designation of images, and the designation of divinity, that occurs in the Walker and Young texts. The historical context of these passages is the brutal experience of American slavery, coupled with the conversion experience of Black slaves and free persons to Christianity.

Though our cruel oppressors and murderers, may (if possible) treat us more cruel, as Pharoah did the Children of Israel, yet the God of the Ethiopian, has been pleased to hear our moans in consequence of oppression, and the day of our redemption from abject wretchedness draweth near, when we shall be enabled, in the most extended sense of the word, to stretch forth our hand to the Lord our God. [Walker (1829), 1965:xiv]

We tell you of a surety, the decree hath already passed the judgement seat of an undeviating God, wherein he hath said, "surely hath the cries of the black, a most persecuted people, ascended to my throne and craved my mercy; now, behold! I will stretch forth mine hand and gather them to the palm, that they become, unto me a people, and I unto them their God." [Young (1829), 1951:91f.]

What is crucial to observe here is that "the God of the Ethiopians" and "an undeviating God" are designated not only for the sake of worship—"that they become unto me a people, and I unto them their God"—but also for the sake of freedom: because "the day of our redemption from abject wretchedness draweth near." But this reference to freedom can be read not only as simple prophecy (as a prediction of the coming emancipation). Rather, it is most profoundly understood as prophetic incantation; as a religious expression intended to induce, summon, or conjure God for the realization of some emancipatory future.

Similar 'strategies of inducement' have been clearly described by the literary critic, Kenneth Burke:

Neo-positivism has done much in revealing the secret commands and exhortations in words—as Edward M. Maisel, in *An Anatomy of Literature*, reveals in a quotation from Carnap, noting how the apparent historical creed: "There is only one race of superior men, say the race of Hottentots, and this race alone is worthy of ruling other races. Members of these other races are inferior," should be analytically translated as: "Members of the race of Hottentots! Unite and battle to dominate the other races!" The "facts" of the historical assertion here are but a strategy of inducement (apparently describing the scene for the action of a drama, they are themselves a dramatic act prodding to a further dramatic act). [1957:6]

Two differences may be noted between the strategy of inducement as presented by Burke, and that which we find in Ethiopianism. First, these

texts constitute a religious strategy—indeed, a strategy in which the drama evoked is not only human but also divine in biblical terms. Second, these “secret commands and exhortations” are not aimed primarily at human hearers, but pre-eminently at that divine hearer who has been designated as biblical God and “the God of the Ethiopians.”

A more contemporary instance of conjuring God for freedom is provided (once again) by DuBois. His famous “Litany of Atlanta” displays several literary and spiritual aspects of conjuration. This poem was written after the catastrophic Atlanta Riot of September, 1906: a three day onslaught of whites against blacks. No previous race incident had so affected DuBois. Having no human resources for the redress of such grievances, he turned to the divine and even attempted to provoke God by a scarcely veiled insult:

Sit no longer Blind, Lord God, deaf to
Our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering
Surely Thou, too, art not white, O Lord, a
pale, bloodless, heartless thing!

Yet this implied defamation of the divine character is immediately alternated with the imagery and rhetoric of Christian allegiance: “Ah! Christ of all the Pities!” the poet now exclaims. Indeed, he proceeds even to repent:

Forgive the thought! Forgive these wild, blasphemous words! Thou art still the God of our black fathers and in Thy Soul's Soul sits some soft darkening of the evening, some shadowing of the velvet night. [1920:27]

Here we should note that this poetic conjuration involves the designation of an image. It is a counter-image, in fact, to the God who is “white . . . a pale, bloodless, heartless thing.” In place of this monstrous image there is designated “the God of our Black fathers.” But in this poem the designation of images is identical with the designation of divinity. It is a particular divinity, in whose “Soul's Soul sits some soft darkenings” and who is invoked not through the rage of the preceding verses, but now by ‘switching’ to classical religious postures of penitence, petition, and prayerful abandonment to God.

It is this abrupt switching from the rhetoric of inducement (command) and provocation, to classical expressions of petition (supplication) and prayerful self-abandonment, that constitutes the deep structure or inner dynamism of Christian conjuration. We take up an analysis of this dynamism in the next section.

III. The Inner Dynamism: “Style-Switching” in Religion and Culture

The term “style-switching” has been coined by the socio-linguist Morton Marks to describe a fascinating aspect of creativity in Black culture.

Marks' work has focused specifically on the area of ethnomusicology, in which he has completed field studies involving Black cultural groups in both the United States and the Caribbean. His research documents the dualistic nature of "ritual structures" in Afro-American music. Marks has persuasively demonstrated how this music often functions to induce trance behavior during sacred as well as secular ritual events. But the key to the inducement of the trance state is an abrupt shift in ritual structure from one element of the dualism to the other. What is the dualism indicated here?

The crucial feature of this ritually structured dualism is what is called "style-switching." This is the alternating of patterned expression from the forms of one cultural system to those of a different system. "What is crucial for the discussion," Marks says, "is that switching is always from a 'white' style to a 'black' style, from a European to an African one." [1974:63f.] The polarization of styles between two cultural systems, one African and one European, constitutes the basic dualism. Marks elaborates the operation of this dualism in the following manner:

What I am calling ritual form applies to cultures as well as to individuals; it represents in microcosm the situation of contact and subsequent transition between African and European-derived cultural forms. These transitions are symbolized in the alternation between various styles and/or codes, both linguistic and musical. At the same time, when style-switching takes place in Afro-American cultures, it creates a ritual setting, which may be either "sacred" or "secular." [63f.] . . .

To put it another way, style-switching may be said to arise out of culture contact, and it is employed on the symbolic level to express what Reisman has called the "duality of cultural patterning" between European and African forms. [64]

DuBois, of course, at the turn of the century articulated a theory of double consciousness. It is the term used in Black studies to refer to DuBois' speculative view of Afro-Americans as a bicultural people who are both African and American; both "black" and "white." "One ever feels his two-ness. . ." runs the classic passage from DuBois' essay entitled, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings":

—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder . . . The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. [1903;16-17]

Elsewhere the term 'bicultural' has been employed in more recent attempts to acknowledge the reality of double consciousness. Moreover, the term is sometimes used to suggest the idea of a successful resolution of what DuBois called "this strife." "Because Afro-American culture is a homegrown product, it continues to develop within the matrix of American society. The result is that blacks are becoming more and more bicultural."

tural, able to shift back and forth between two social worlds" [Blauner, 1972:148n.]. It is this notion of shifting back and forth between the two worlds of DuBois' "double consciousness" that leads us to Morton Marks' concept of "style-switching." What this concept adds to previous formulations is a structural basis for demonstrating the concrete operation of this duality in a specific domain of Black culture.

Although Marks' research has focused on the ritual and musical operation of "style-switching," he is also aware that the dynamism operates in other, linguistic domains. The alternation of styles, as he says, is both "linguistic and musical" and underlies "a number of communication events in a variety of New World settings." [64] In terms of this essay, how does Marks' research pertain to the linguistic domain and expression? It is at this point that we put forward an informed hypothesis about this expression, based on the preceding discussion of "style-switching" in Afro-American music.

In the broadest terms possible, Black cultural and intellectual creativity may be characterized by dualistic patternings in a variety of domains. In each domain, whether musical or linguistic, literary or dramatic, cultural forms identified as "African" or "Black" are juxtaposed affirmatively or negatively with polar forms identified as "European" or "white." The affirmation of Christ as a Black messiah over against a "white" God, for example, or the negation of a Western concept of time in preference for an African conception [cf. Morrison, 1976:14], are both instances of this dualistic patterning in Afro-American thought.

But, as Marks points out in connection with ritual structures in Afro-American music, "there is more going on than what is conventionally called 'expressive behavior.' The change in style is generating a ritual event, namely spirit-possession." [67] Analogously, we are right to suspect that more is going on than mere 'rhetorical expression' in literary and religious expression which features an abrupt shift in style. Indeed, based on our earlier discussion of literary-religious texts, we may hypothesize that the change in style is simulating what would elsewhere be the ritual act of conjuration. Yet what most often characterizes "style-switching" in Black religious expression is not only, nor essentially, the dualistic patterning between "Black" identified and "white" identified styles. Rather, what more typically characterizes this religious expression is the alternation between forms of inducement and provocation on the one hand, and forms of petition and prayerful abandonment to divine providence on the other.

Two final instances must suffice to illustrate this characteristic switching to prayerful petition and abandonment. First we turn to the celebrated poet of the Harlem Renaissance, Countee Cullen, who was also a Methodist minister's son. Cullen is interesting in terms of our study because, in the poem "Counter Mood," he speaks of "Faith, the canny

conjurer" [1947:86]. Of interest also are his poetic efforts, similar to those of DuBois' and other Black thinkers', to designate a "black" over against a "white" Christ. For our purposes the most significant place where this designation occurs is not in his lengthy piece called "The Black Christ," but rather in the better known poem, "Heritage."

This is the poem which begins, "What is Africa to me . . . ?" [1925:36-41] There the poet achieves a high degree of irony by means of an apparent indifference and even disdain towards Africa. This disdain is crowned by the poet's "idle boast" that he has advanced beyond "quaint, outlandish heathen gods [that] black men fashion out of rods . . . in a likeness like their own." Contempt for African religiosity is skillfully balanced, however, by a final stanza in which the poet's tenacious heritage unexpectedly reappears. In that stanza he is driven to confess that, despite his post-African boast:

I belong to Jesus Christ . . .
Heathen gods are naught to me
nevertheless "in my heart do I play a double part."

The poet's duplicity is striking precisely from the point of view of "style-switching." First he sets the context in which his repressed African heritage returns:

Ever at Thy glowing altar
Must my heart grow sick and falter,
Wishing He I served were black,
Thinking then it would not lack
Precedent of pain to guide it,
Let who would or might deride it;
Surely then this flesh would know
Yours had borne a kindred woe.

Thus it is in the context of Christian workshop that the poet's heritage re-emerges; a heritage in which people conjure gods "in a likeness like their own." But it is in the more immediate context of the poem itself that the poet goes beyond such efforts to induce the divine. Juxtaposed against the designated image of a Black Christ there occurs—in prayerful address—the confession,

Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,
Daring even to give You
Dark despairing features . . .

and then the petition,

Lord, forgive me if my need
Sometimes shapes a human creed.

Cullen's switch from the vaunting claim of belonging to Jesus Christ on the one hand, to the prayerful confession of fashioning "a human

creed" on the other, represents a characteristic moment of Christian conjuration. For a final instance of this dynamic switching to penitence, petition and self-abandonment, we turn once again to the anti-slavery text of the Ethiopianist writer, David Walker.

I aver that when I look over these United States of America, and the world, and see the ignorant deceptions and consequent wretchedness of my brethren, I am brought oftimes solemnly to a stand, and in the midst of my reflections I exclaim to my God, "Lord didst thou make us to be slaves to our brethren, the whites?" But when I reflect that God is just, and that millions of my wretched brethren would meet death with glory—yea, more, would plunge into the very mouth of cannons and be torn into particles as minute as the atoms which compose the elements of the earth, in preference to a mean submission to the lash of tyrant, I am with streaming eyes, compelled to shrink back into nothingness before my Maker, and exclaim again, thy will be done, O Lord God Almighty." [(1829) 1965:28]

In this powerful passage of religious expression we notice the correlation between two strategies of inducement. First, as in Burke's example, there is the strategy of inducing dramatic resistance in "my wretched brethren [to] meet death with glory . . . in preference to a mean submission." But this humanly oriented strategy is encompassed by the more profound effort to induce "my God" and "my Maker" for divine justice on earth. Yet we may further observe, in this second strategy, a characteristic "switching of styles." On the one hand there is the interrogation (provocation) of God—"Lord, didst thou make us to be slaves . . .?" On the other hand we find the surrender of all strategies in abandonment to the divine will. This is a self-abandonment in which the conjuror "shrink[s] back into nothingness . . . [exclaiming] thy will be done, O Lord God Almighty."

In such exemplary passages, Black religious expression includes but also goes beyond the all-too-human scheme of inducing and manipulating the divine. It is precisely at the point of surrendering the religious strategy of inducement—that is, precisely at the point of prayerful abandonment to divine providence, that the spirituality of conjuration becomes generically "Christian" (or, more precisely, biblical). In the preceding discussion we saw how "style-switching" in religious expression can inspire or simulate this spirituality. In the concluding section of this essay we will examine this religious expression as an authentic synthesis between African conjuration and Christian spirituality.

IV. An Afro-Christian Synthesis: The Analogy of Spirit Possession

Over the centuries of European contact with Africa, the conjurational mode of religion has been sharply contrasted with Christian spiritual practices. In the present phenomenological study, however, we have the opportunity to allow for the possibility of a synthesis or fusion between these polarized spiritualities. Instead of a total disjunction of the two, or

instead of a kind of syncretism which is neither genuinely African nor genuinely Christian, are we able to establish the authenticity of a conjurational spirituality which is Afro-Christian?

The contemporary vitality and viability of spirit possession in Black religion provides a ready analogy for this task. Unlike conjuration, the event of spirit possession (involving trance states, shouting and other ecstatic expressions) is recognized in Black studies as a survival of African spirituality and at the same time as a genuinely Christian form of 'Holy Spirit worship.' Thus it is in terms of spirit possession that Black religious thinkers, notably Henry Mitchell and Gayraud Wilmore, have already articulated a phenomenology of Afro-Christian synthesis. Are we able, following that lead, to replicate their achievement in terms of a 'Holy Spirit conjuration'?

I

Blacks evolved an understanding that the plurality of beings which had formerly possessed them were in fact only one, and that this was none other than the third person of the Trinity. [Mitchell, 1975:140]

How did the first generation of African slaves traverse the cultural and spiritual abyss separating them from the gospel as transmitted by their oppressors? This is the abiding enigma of slave religion. Today there are several phenomenological and hermeneutical (interpretive) attempts to account for such a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer). The following account claims distinction only in its effort to indicate the operation of spiritual discernment among members of early Black churches and religious groups. That is, it will be shown how the transition from African traditional religions to biblical Christianity was authenticated by discerning the difference between the Holy Spirit and lesser spirits. If it is true that "possession in the African tradition was the height of worship—the supreme religious act" [Mitchell, 1975:144], then the Christian "charism" or spiritual gift of discernment may well have been the sine qua non of conversion and communal life in early Black churches.

First of all, there must have occurred a long interval during which a confusion of spiritualities allowed some mis-identification but also some continuity between two different traditions of spirit possession.

Notwithstanding the efforts of the early missionaries in the American colonies to introduce the slaves to a religion which demythologized the elemental powers of the primitive consciousness . . . the missionary could not, in good conscience, depreciate the presence and mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. This work could readily be interpreted by the slave as identical with conjuration and the Orisha-possession of his ancestral religion. [Wilmore, 1973:33f.]

Here it is suggested that one of the major points of continuity for the slaves was the centrality of spirit possession. (Wilmore also indicates the

slaves' identification of Christianity with conjuration, but we will take up this aspect later.) This point of continuity could have become practicable for the slaves insofar as their African heritage granted them a special affinity for similar elements in Christianity. Slaves would have perceived these similarities in spite of white missionary attempts to suppress the more ecstatic and supernatural aspects of biblical religion. At any rate such attempts were mitigated by the new evangelical piety and zeal characteristic of the revival tradition in Methodism and in the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century. Slaves who were 'evangelized' by these church movements would have found even more occasion to experience some measure of continuity between African and Christian supernaturalism.

In some such manner spirit possession would have initially functioned as a bridge between two dramatically different religious worlds. But very quickly this bridge would have betrayed the slaves by becoming a trap-door—a trap door into syncretism and religious inauthenticity. Based on numerous historical records criticizing slave religion as "heathenish" and syncretistic [cf. Raboteau, 1979], we may be certain that slaves were instructed and admonished concerning such dangers. Therefore a synthesis was required which could provide, on the one hand, sufficient continuity with African traditional religions to render the new religion culturally accessible. But, on the other hand, that synthesis was also required to effect a profound break with African spirit possession—a radical discontinuity—if it were to become an authentic variant of Christianity. The distinction here can be vividly illustrated by reconstructing early syncretistic developments in the Caribbean. In the following passages Leonard Barrett presents and then comments on such a reconstruction.

"A hundred or so Negroes freshly arrived from Africa would be herded into a church. Whips cracked and they were ordered to kneel. A priest and his acolytes appeared before the altar and mass was said. Then the priest followed by the acolytes carrying a basin of holy water, walked slowly down the aisle and with vigorous swings of the Aspergillum scattered the water over the heads of the crowd, chanting in Latin. The whips cracked again, the slaves rose from their knees and emerged into the sunlight, converts to Christianity."

What took place here was not a conversion to Christianity but a legitimization of Vodun. Among those Africans herded into the church were several priests and priestesses who we may believe watched carefully every movement in his or her rituals, which were not too different from those they had learned in Africa. Between 1730 and 1790, the African rituals and those of Catholicism merged in what may be called a religious symbiosis in which Vodun copied just enough of the Catholic ritual forms to disguise the real religion of Africa. [1974:101]

Something like this superficial 'baptizing' and disguising of African religion must have occurred also in the North American colonies. But the evidence shows that gradually a more thoroughgoing conversion to

Christianity was achieved. There was a balance struck between elements of continuity and discontinuity, so that slaves could pass-over from African spirit possession to Christian "Holy Spirit" possession with some capability of distinguishing between the two. This is precisely the capability described in the New Testament as the charism of "distinguishing between spirits" [1 Corinthians 12.10], or the gift of spiritual discernment. Some such spiritual capability is implied in the early Black church achievement of a new religious expression, which nevertheless retained some stylistic and ecstatic forms characteristic of a former tradition.

This synthesis of African and Christian influences . . . was a sound and lasting metamorphosis early accomplished in the American colonies. Those who had once been healingly possessed by a variety of deities were now overshadowed by the one but triune God, in his person as Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit. . . . This, I contend, was the single most brilliant and productive adaptation of all the numerous adaptations of African religion into Black Christianity. [Mitchell, 1975:139]

Here we have sketched the phenomenology of a religious development which was, for the slaves, a spiritual necessity if their new life were to be authentically Christian. For the radical monotheism of biblical religion requires an 'infinite qualitative difference' (Barth) between the one God and all lesser gods. Even though the slaves' reception of the gospel was "undoubtedly influenced by strong white witness at the theoretical level, against polytheism," nevertheless it also "required more than a radical reduction in the pantheon of deities. It also necessitated a major revision of the esteem not to be thought of as just another member of a large and often competitive and manipulable group of lesser deities" [Mitchell, 1975:140]. The history of the Black religious experience, from the slavery period to the present, tells clearly of such high esteem in the spirituality of Afro-American Christians. This esteem testifies not only to their capability of distinguishing between spirits, but also to the authenticity of their Christianity.

II

In contemporary terms, Henry Mitchell has suggested that spirit possession functions covertly in secular contexts (like jazz clubs) where ecstatic behavior is also ritually structured and patterned [1975:145f.]. Thus Mitchell's view of the secular viability of spirit possession corroborates that of Marks and others. [For the psycho-social nature of contemporary spirit possession see the excellent study by Walker, 1972.] Is it possible that secular and even religious expressions of conjuration may function at a level even more covert than that of spirit possession? What phenomenological justification is there for regarding conjuration as an ongoing and viable Afro-Christian synthesis?

Two twentieth-century examples of the viability of conjuration in

Black culture may be profitably indicated here. In a political and a theological sense they are diametrically opposed, but in terms of deep structure they share a conjurational spirituality. The first instance is religious: Black devotion to a 'comforter Jesus' during the great depression and the period between the world wars. The second instance is secular: the advent of the Black Power movement following the mid-century civil rights struggle. How can these strikingly dissimilar phenomena be structurally identified as conjurational? Briefly stated, Black devotion to a comforter Jesus, 'meek and mild,' may be best understood as a strategy of inducement. This strategy arose in the context of the economic hardships that impacted Black communities perhaps more harshly than others during this period. The objective here was explicitly a kind of pious humility and unquestioning obedience that would spiritually induce temporal blessings and divine favor in this life—as well as in the next. Understanding this devotion to a 'meek Jesus as a conjurational strategy is thus a counter-interpretation to the familiar portrait of such piety as compensatory (Mays), as religious docility (Marx), or as psychic regression (Freud).

But perhaps even this hermeneutical reconstruction misses the spiritual depth of such Jesus piety. Devotion to a meek Jesus may be better understood in terms of what Burke described as: "the 'incantatory' factor in imagery: its function as a device for inviting us to 'make ourselves over in the image of the imagery'" [1975:100]. Unfortunately the scope of this essay does not allow us to inquire into the use of incantatory practices in Christian conjuration as a means of becoming like the designated image. Such an inquiry would be especially fruitful in terms of a dialogue between conjurational and contemplative spiritualities. But this dialogue must await some future phenomenological study. Yet it is precisely this incantatory element, diametrically re-oriented from our previous example, that led one writer to perceive a conjurational spirituality within the Black Power movement.

Present-day trends are best seen as revitalizations of a traditional African world view. . . . Black Power, as the assertion of Black being, is a return to the ancestral ontology. . . . Thus it was the incantation of Black magicians such as Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and a host of other visionaries . . . that has enabled Blacks everywhere . . . to reassert their Black identity, their Black personality and their Black sacred destiny.

Black Power is Black incantation (magic) pronouncing a curse on the witchcraft of white racism, and it is African theology. . . . Contemporary Black theology, then is rightfully understood as primarily a reconstruction of the collective unconscious of African peoples. [Barrett, 1974:215]

It was in slave religion, of course, that this "reconstruction" and this incantatory Black theology began. In this connection, Gayraud Wilmore corroborates both the conjurational and the emancipatory aspects of

slave religion.

The essential ingredient of Black Christianity prior to the Civil War was the creative spirituality of the African religions. The defining characteristic of that spirituality was . . . the reality of the spirit world and the intersection between that world and the world of objective perception. Such an ontology called for the release of the human spirit, as the sacred vessel in which the vital forces of the universe coalesce, from every power—whether of man or the gods—that would exercise tyranny over it . . . [1973:36f]

But how did Afro-American conjuration develop from an “ancestral ontology” in which it functioned as incantatory magic, to its present metamorphosis as a Christian spirituality? This is a question parallel to that of the transition from African spirit possession to Christian ‘Holy Spirit’ possession. Earlier we encountered Wilmore’s view that both spirit possession and conjuration were identified by slave converts with “the presence and mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.” In the preceding discussion we attempted a brief elaboration of this view as regards spirit possession. In concluding this essay we now attempt to indicate, analogously, how such a view of conjuration would proceed. Albert Raboteau suggests the historical basis for such an attempt in his book, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* [1978]. Raboteau indicates the likelihood of a “complementary” relationship between Christianity and conjuration, over-against the conventional tendency to oppose the two. After discussing the covert persistence of conjuration in slave communities despite official attempts at censure, Raboteau concludes that:

The conflict between Christianity and conjure was more theoretical than actual. . . . Christian tradition itself has always been attuned to special gifts (charisms) of the Spirit as they are manifested in prophecy, healing, and miracles. As a result, Christianity, especially on the popular level, has a certain tendency to appropriate and baptize magical lore from other traditions. In an important sense, conjure and Christianity were not so much antithetical as complementary. [1978:287f.]

Thus Raboteau suggests that conjuration, like spirit possession in our previous discussion, may have been appropriated or “baptized” by Christian spirituality. But was this a baptism of elements that are genuinely ‘complementary’, as he suggests? Or rather was it a deceptive, uneasy baptism of elements that remain fundamentally antithetical? What is at stake in this question is whether or not there occurred, in the context and religious life of the slave community, this new thing: an Afro-Christian mode of conjuring God. One way to resolve the matter is to recall Mitchell’s discussion of the slaves’ transition from polytheism to monotheism. In that discussion he presented the idea of “esteem” as a criterion of the slaves’ new allegiance to the one God. The content of this esteem—or, in religious terms, “reverence”—required that God “was not to be thought of as just another member of a large and often competitive and manipu-

lable group of lesser deities." Here we should recognize, precisely in this formulation of God as supreme (transcendent) and as non-manipulable (sovereign), the content of that esteem which was required of the slaves in their passage from polytheism to biblical religion. Analogously, we can identify esteem as the criterion which determines whether or not a conjurational spirituality is Christian.

With the designation of a Christian God Christian standards penetrate the cult, above all the sharp separation of good and evil; but the nature of worship, the service of God, remains to a great extent African. For God is not only served but invoked, called up and embodied by the faithful. [Jahn, 1961:219]

Yet, despite this excellent synthetic statement by Jahn we must say one thing more. What is crucial in Black religious expression is that the invoking and 'calling up' of God is always alternated (as in "style-switching") with expressions of surrendering or giving up the attempt to induce and manipulate the divine. The alternating or switching to expressions of self-abnegation and prayerful abandonment of God, as exemplified by Walker, DuBois, and numerous Black sermons, prayers, and literary expressions, is the precise measure of the high esteem accorded to the divine in Christian conjuration. Without such alternation and such esteem, that conjuration ceases to be Christian however much it remains African. In this manner we have indicated that no structural necessity prohibits Christian spirituality from retaining on the one hand, yet transforming on the other, the conjurational mode of African spirituality. More significantly, we have also indicated the structural basis which permits this retention to occur within a genuine Afro-Christian synthesis.

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