

THOMAS R. FRAZIER*

Historians and Afro-American Religion

Introduction

"The Negro has already been pointed out many times as a religious animal, — a being of that deep emotional nature which turns instinctively toward the supernatural."¹ With these words W. E. B. DuBois states one of the two basic assumptions of much of the writing on black religion. The other is like unto it: "The Negro church of to-day is the social centre of Negro life in the United States and the most characteristic expression of the African character."² Few scholars who have dealt either superficially or extensively with the life or history of Afro-America have challenged these assumptions. One wonders, then, why these same scholars have dealt so carelessly or cursorily with these apparently critical dimensions of black American existence.

The purpose of this essay is not primarily to answer the question why, though answers will be suggested. What I have done here is take a look at the writings on black religion by a variety of historians in an attempt to determine what kinds of presuppositions, both attitudinal and methodological, have affected their presentations. In an earlier study of this sort, I examined the work of social scientists.³ The historians surveyed in this paper resemble the social scientists in many ways and reference will be made in this study to some of the categories established in the earlier work.

In preparing this paper I have looked at samples of historical writing in five different subject matter areas. First is the work of Protestant church historians who have surveyed the history of American religion (or

* Dr. Frazier is Professor, Dept. of History, Baruch College of the City University of New York.

¹ W.E.B. Dubois, "Of the Faith of the Fathers," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961), p. 146. This chapter on the black church was first printed as "The Religion of the American Negro," *New World*, IX (Dec., 1900), 614-624.

² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³ Thomas R. Frazier, "An Analysis of Social Scientific Writing on American Negro Religion" (unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1967). See also Frazier, "Changing Perspectives in the Study of Afro-American Religion," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, VI (Fall, 1978), 51-68.

Christianity, or, in many cases, Protestantism). Robert T. Handy has raised several questions about the lack of consideration given black religion by American church historians, and my examination of these synoptic works serves to provide evidence for Handy's prosecution.⁴

A second group of works consists of surveys of Afro-American history, beginning with that of the ex-slave William Wells Brown⁵ in 1874 through the 1976 revision of a textbook by Meier and Rudwick.⁶

In order to see how black religion has been treated in works on general American history, I selected a sample of the more widely known surveys of American history, both textbooks and works intended for the general reader.

A fourth category includes studies by historians of aspects of black religion. As I have already suggested, these are few and, until recently, seriously inadequate.

The last group of works consists of studies from the past twenty years which have dealt with segments of American history in which black religion plays a significant role, even if these historians were not always aware of it.

The structure of the paper, not surprisingly since it deals with historians, is roughly chronological. For purposes of our analysis the writings have been divided into four periods: 1) 1844-1903; 2) 1904-1950; 3) 1951-1967; and 4) 1968-1976. The periodization is, of course, somewhat arbitrary, but I believe it does not do violence to the material and will help us understand it.

At least one point should be made clear at the outset. Do not expect much from these historians. It is widely recognized that black people have been overlooked in the writing of most American history. One is not surprised, then, to find a sub-topic under "black" to be even further neglected. American historians as well as American church historians have an orthodox tradition with which they prefer to deal. This tradition has certain acceptable heresies—Transcendentalism, for example, or, for the secular historian, populism. But popular movements, by and large, have been neglected.⁷ Times, however, may be a-changing. We will take note

⁴ Robert T. Handy, "Negro Christianity and American Church Historiography," in Jerald C. Brauer (ed.), *Reinterpretations in American Church History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 91-112.

⁵ William Wells Brown, *The Rising Son; or the Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing, Inc., 1969), first published in 1874.

⁶ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto*, 3rd edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), first edition published in 1966.

⁷See, in this connection, John F. Wilson, "The Historical Study of Marginal American Religious Movements," in Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone (eds.), *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 596-611.

of this possibility in the conclusion.

I The Nineteenth Century

American Protestants in the nineteenth century spent a great deal of time congratulating themselves for separating religion from the state. Although this led to a schismatic Protestantism, there was considerable pride in the church's continued existence out from under the state'segis, economically and politically. The first significant attempt to defend this religious way of life and explain its workings is credited to Robert Baird.⁸ Writing in 1844 to justify the religious ways of Americans to the English, Baird fixes on the principle of voluntarism as the constitutive characteristic of American religion.

Baird deals with Afro-Americans in two connections in his work. The withdrawal of Richard Allen and his associates from the Methodists in Philadelphia and the subsequent separation of the Zion Methodists in New York meet with Baird's approval. He comments in the latter case that the division occurred not over doctrine but because the black preachers were "not admitted into the itinerary, and consequently having no share in the government of the church, nor a right to receive salaries, being only local [lay?] preachers."⁹ Baird is, on the other hand, disturbed by the desire of slaves to have separate churches. He believes that it is pride which causes this unfortunate desire. Master and slave should worship together because then in the presence of each other they could hear their respective duties under the Gospel.¹⁰ This, of course, makes it clearer to us why the slaves wished to be separate. In any case, slavery, Baird admits, is a hindrance to the voluntary principle because of the widespread nature of plantation life and the lack of resources among the slaves to support financially such an activity, particularly if they have non-or anti-religious masters.¹¹

Philip Schaff, in his justification of America to the Germans, deals only very briefly with blacks, but raises in the process two issues which become paramount concerns for those attempting to deal with black religion. First, he notes in extenuation that "the condition of the negroes in the American slave states is a great advance on the heathen barbarism of their brethren in Africa."¹² The relationship between the Afro-American

⁸ Robert Baird, *Religion in the United States of America* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), first published in 1844.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 595.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76ff.

¹² Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of the Political, Social and Religious Character of the United States of North America*, trans. from the German (New York: C. Scribner, 1855), p. ix.

and his African past also concerns the black historians writing in the nineteenth century, as we shall see. In his only other mention of blacks in connection with religion, Schaff makes a judgment which has been accepted by most historians of this matter until now: "Amongst the negroes, . . . both free and slave, Methodism has most influence, and seems with its emotional excitements, well-adopted to their sanguine, excitable temperament."¹³

Schaff's most notable contribution to American church historiography is not, of course, his little book of 1855, but rather his editing of the American Church History Series of the late nineteenth century. Here he provided for separate volumes describing the history of each of the major denominations as well as two summary volumes. Needless to say, there is no volume dealing with the black church or black denomination, although the two volumes dealing with the Baptists and the Methodists make brief mention of blacks.¹⁴

Of the two summary volumes, one can be dismissed simply. In Leonard Bacon's narrative history of American Christianity, the black church is given only one contemptuous reference. In writing about the growth of black churches after the Civil War he comments: "There is reason to hope that the change [i.e. separate churches] may by and by, with the advance of education and moral training among this people, inure to their spiritual advantage. There is equal reason to fear that at present, in many cases, it works to their serious detriment."¹⁵ In this essay, then, Leonard Bacon gets only one contemptuous reference.

In striking contrast to Bacon, even more startling when one realizes Bacon must have known about it, is H. K. Carroll's volume, No. I in the series.¹⁶ This work, while not strictly a synoptic history, uses the census data of 1890 to draw a composite map of American religion. Carroll presents significant material on the black church, as, of course, the census data would have prescribed, pointing out, among other things, that relatively more black people were church members than were whites.¹⁷ Throughout his historical and statistical material Carroll treats black religion with thorough-going respect, and while sharing some of conven-

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁴ A. H. Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1894), pp. 464f.; James Monroe Buckley, *A History of Methodists in the United States* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1896), pp. 308-311, 346f.

¹⁵ Leonard W. Bacon, *A History of American Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), p. 354.

¹⁶ H. K. Carroll, *The Religious Forces of the United States: Enumerated, Classified, and Described on the Basis of the Government Census of 1890* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1893).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1v.

tional wisdom with regard to the nature of black piety, he characteristically applies an insightful intelligence that throws new light on the old conventions. For example, in the matter of the blacks' having become Baptists and Methodists:

He loves these denominations, and seems to find in them an atmosphere more congenial to his warm, sunny nature, and fuller scope for his religious activity, than in other communions. Perhaps this is due to his long association with them and his training. There is no reason to believe that he might not have been as intense a Presbyterian as he is a Baptist, or as true a Congregationalist as he is a Methodist, if these denominations had been able to come as near to him in the days of his slavery as did the Baptist and Methodist churches.¹⁸

Most importantly, in Carroll we find introduced an important principle in determining the attitudes of historians toward black religion. This is the use of a comparative perspective which does not isolate the black religious phenomenon but attempts to place it in a broader context, therefore eliminating or at least softening its otherwise distinctive characteristics. Thus:

The negro of the United States has no religion but the Christian religion. He is not a heathen, like our native Indian. He worships but one God, who is a just and merciful God, desiring that all men should be free from sin, and should come to a knowledge of the way of life through Jesus Christ. He is still more or less superstitious; he still has some faith in the power of charms; there is still some trace of heathenish practices in him; but our own race has not altogether outgrown childish thoughts about unlucky days and the way to avoid the evil they bring, and how mascots procure success. We cannot condemn the negro for his superstition without taking blame upon ourselves for the tenacity with which we cling to belief in signs and times and things, lucky and unlucky.¹⁹

Carroll may not be able to condemn but many of his successors have and continue to be harshly critical of certain aspects of the religious behavior of blacks which behavior has its counterpart in white culture, a small detail which continues to be overlooked by many scholars.

Before leaving Carroll, we should note his attitude toward the religions of Africa, if for no other reason than that it contrasts so significantly with the attitude of the contemporary black historian George Washington Williams, whose work we shall consider shortly. While pointing out that there are indeed "savage" and "cruel rites and observances" there, he concludes that the African also has "conceptions of beings of exalted power who affect the destiny of men."²⁰ This observation is significant not only for its contrast with Williams but also because few white scholars saw fit to make positive comments about African religiosity until recently.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. liv.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. liii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Turning from the historians of the church to the historians of the black community in this period, we notice immediately one significant difference in their understanding of black religion. This difference can be symbolized by the figure of Nat Turner. For William Wells Brown and Georgia Washington Williams, pioneer black historians, Nat Turner epitomized one strand of Afro-American religion. Brown's epitaph for Turner suggests that there is no question of his sincerity—"Everything appeared to him a vision, and all favorable omens were signs from God."²¹ Williams, as well as Brown, sees Turner's conception of religion as distinct from the "superstitious" beliefs of many slaves:

At length [Nat] declared that God spoke to him. He began to dream dreams and see visions. His grandmother, a very old and superstitious person, encouraged him in his dreaming. But, notwithstanding, he believed that he had communion with God, and saw the most remarkable visions, he denounced in the severest terms the familiar practice among slaves, known as "conjuring," "gufering," and fortune-telling. . . . He presented God as the "*All-Powerful*"; he regarded him as a great "Warrior."²²

However much they agree on Nat Turner's religious insights, Brown and Williams disagree on the religious conditions of the African homeland. Williams, who among other things was a Baptist minister, falls into the trap Carter Woodson will warn of forty years later.²³ He believed the missionaries.

It is not our purpose to describe the religions and superstitions of Africa. . . . The world knows that this poor people are idolatrous,—'bow down to wood and stone.' They do not worship the true God, nor conform their lives unto the teachings of the Savior. They worship snakes, the sun, moon, and stars, trees and water-courses. But the bloody human sacrifice which they make is the most revolting feature of their spiritual degradation. . . . The false religions of Africa are but the lonely and feeble reaching out of the human soul after the true God.²⁴

You see here the importance of the contrast with Carroll mentioned above.

Brown, on the other hand, who deals extensively with Africa in his work, challenges certain assumptions widely held by whites as well as blacks such as Williams by discussing the impact of Islam on West Africa.

Whatever may be the intellectual inferiority of the Negro tribes (if, indeed, such inferiority exist), it is certain that many of these tribes have received the religion of Islam without its being forced upon them by the overpowering arms of victorious

²¹ Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

²² George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America, from 1619-1880* (New York: Arno Press, 1968, 2 volumes in 1), Vol. II, p. 86. First published in 1883.

²³ Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History*, 8th edition (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1945), pp. 6f. First edition published in 1922.

²⁴ Williams, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 83f.

invaders. The quiet development and organization of a religious community [as opposed to pagan] in the heart of Africa has shown that Negroes, equally with other races, are susceptible of moral and spiritual impressions, and of all the sublime possibilities of religion.²⁵

Incidentally, one reason Brown was so impressed with the influence of Islam in Africa was its belief in total abstinence.²⁶

Williams, as one might imagine, spent little time on Africa in his work. He dealt rather extensively, however, on the black church organizations. He established the precedent for the second assumption stated in the opening sentences of this essay. There occurs in many of the books considered in this study what I call the "standard paragraph." This "paragraph" states that the black church is the central institution of the black community and that it serves as a community center for the people and also allows for leadership training for those precluded from participation in the larger society. A prototypical form of this assumption is found in Williams' description of the growth of the A.M.E. Church.

It brought the people together not only in religious sympathy, but by the ties of a common interest in all affairs of their race and condition. The men in the organization who possessed the power of speech, who had talents to develop, and an ambition to serve their race, found this church a wide field of usefulness.²⁷

Before leaving Williams one must note his observation about the importance of the A. M. E. Church to black people: "The African Methodist Episcopal Church of America has exerted a wider and better influence upon the Negro race than any other organization created and managed by Negroes."²⁸ This attitude is echoed by Du Bois, among others.²⁹ There is no doubt that the A. M. E. Church was seen by black leaders and intellectuals around the turn of the century as the masterwork of black organizational capacity. In the twentieth century, however, the A. M. E. Church seems to slip into the "dark ages" of black religious history of which we will speak in the next section of the paper.

Brief mention must be made here of another history of black people written in the nineteenth century, this one by a white scholar.³⁰ Alexander's *History* has as one of its purposes the justification of racial separation:

[The Negroes] prefer their own organizations separate from the white people. When united together, as was the case after the war, everything was done to make them

²⁵ Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Williams, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 135.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 452.

²⁹ Du Bois, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

³⁰ William T. Alexander, *History of the Colored Race in America* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), first published in 1887.

forget their difference of color, even to a careful wording of their reports and church books. As soon as they have a sufficient number to start a Church for themselves they everywhere drifted apart, and into a distinct church of their own. . . . All have followed this instinct for race separation as soon as they had sufficient numbers to organize themselves into a church.³¹

For Alexander, the sure sign of the black man's sincere conversion during slavery was the way in which he helped his master during the hard times: "In the storm and stress of the war, in the troubled days which followed, in their lives as citizens, and in their lack of malice or revenge, we see the influence of that faith which has been their strongest incentive and our most perfect safeguard."³² It is not surprising, is it then, to find that Alexander does not mention religion in connection with the insurrections of Turner or Vesey?

The attitude of many whites of this time is captured in Alexander's assertion that

As a race the colored people are religious. They perhaps surpass every other race in that respect. . . . It has done more to correct those evil tendencies entailed upon them by a life of ignorance and bondage, and to instill morality and purity into their lives than has any other influence.³³

How comforting! For whites.

This section of the paper concludes with a brief consideration of W. E. B. Du Bois' mystical conception of black religion which is comforting neither to blacks nor whites. In his essay "On the Faith of the Fathers" in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois presents an ideal theory of the church which stands at sharp odds with the institution as he actually perceives it. After concluding that much of the church of his day is hypocritically pious and silent in the face of oppression, he notes that

back of this still broods silently the deep religious feeling of the real Negro heart, the stirring, unguided might of powerful human souls who have lost the guiding star of the past and seek in the great night a new religious ideal. Some day the Awakening will come, when the pent-up vigor of ten million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the goal, out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living—Liberty, Justice, and Right—is marked "For White People Only."³⁴

This mystical vision of the redemptive power of black religion as opposed to the actual life of the black church is a dominant theme in the writings of the current black theologians.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 529.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 528.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 527.

³⁴ Du Bois, *op. cit.*, p. 151. For an extended discussion of Du Bois' approach to black religion, see Frazier, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-38.

II 1900-1950

I have called this period the "dark ages" of Afro-American religion. The general impression is that the black church was either stagnant or retrogressive during these years. For instance, James Cone comments that:

The black church . . . lost its zeal for freedom in the midst of the new structures of white power. . . . But the real sin of the black church and its leaders is that they even convinced themselves that they were doing the right thing by advocating obedience to white oppression as a means of entering at death the future age of heavenly bliss. The black church identified white words with God's Word and convinced its people that by listening in faithful obedience to the "great white father" they would surely enter the "pearly gates."³⁵

While recognizing that religion did provide spiritual nourishment for its adherents, the critics of the black church of this period have preferred to concentrate their fire on the social role of that institution in a society dominated by hostile whites.

But as has been the case with the "dark ages" of medieval historiography, when certain assumptions are challenged, more light appears in the period than was assumed to exist. There is a desperate need for sound historical research on the black church of these years. The social scientific writings dealing with this church almost all proceeded from the assumption that the black church existed primarily to accommodate black people to their inferior racial status. Not surprisingly, the social scientists found what they expected to find.³⁶ This is the way of social science. Historians are supposed to know better.

American church historiography was dominated (one might almost say invented) during this period by scholars at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. The men largely responsible for this were Peter G. Mode and his more widely known successor William Warren Sweet. Any student of American religion has to place himself in Sweet's debt. His narrative volumes of the frontier denominations and his documentary collections are works of skill and insight. On the subject of black religion, however, Sweet should be ignored. It is interesting that this giant in the field of religion on the frontier should be such a pigmy when it comes to describing such an important part of frontier religion as that of the blacks.

In Sweet's massive *The Story of Religion in America*, blacks enter after the Civil War. He writes that at the conclusion of that war Southern denominations wanted to organize the freedmen into churches under

³⁵ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 105, 107.

³⁶ For an extensive survey of these accommodationist writings, see Frazier, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-223.

their control lest the blacks fall into mischievous hands. "But," he goes on to say, "the efforts of the southern churches for the negro were more or less in vain. The negroes were now free and many of them, if for no other reason than to put their freedom to the test, were anxious to separate themselves from the churches of their former masters."³⁷

Sweet's attitude toward the freedmen is clear from this passage.

Naturally the freedmen had strange ideas regarding freedom, many thinking it meant freedom from work, and thousands forsook the plantations and flocked into the towns and cities. Idleness among the negroes gave them plenty of opportunity to exercise their religious desires and it is reported that baptisms were as popular as were operas among the whites.³⁸

Not only that, but religion and politics got confused during Reconstruction. The Negro "could not understand why he should not bring his politics into the church, or why the Union League or the Lincoln Legion should not hold their meetings there."³⁹ I do not understand it either. But at least Sweet is consistent. He is critical of the political involvement of black Chicago churches during the time he is writing.

Sweet's lack of the comparative perspective I mentioned earlier vitiates as racist, criticisms he makes of black churches which he might as well apply to churches in general. For example,

Sometimes the negro church has opposed the best colored leaders, a fact most unfortunate to the best interests of the colored race, while until very recent years the negro churches have not lived up to their opportunities in dealing with the fundamental social problems, either in the cities or in rural communities.⁴⁰

And, in conclusion:

As might be expected, the negro churches have displayed shortcomings. Frequently in their churches worship is subordinated to amusement, due largely to the poverty of the race in social institutions. Too frequently also, the negro church has tolerated lax morals among both ministry and membership especially in financial and sexual matters, facts which negro leaders themselves admit, though investigation shows that in this respect slow gains are perceptible."⁴¹

While the virus of "traditional" attitudes on black religion infects Sweet's own writings, the disease is not necessarily contagious as can be seen in the work of many of Sweet's students.⁴² A widely cited article published in 1931 was begun as a seminar paper in Sweet's class. Luther P. Jackson's "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760

³⁷ William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1939), pp. 472f.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 474f.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 476.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² See, for example, the books of Brauer, Marty, and Handy which are discussed below.

to 1860" is a straightforward narrative of the process by which blacks, slave and free, adopted Christianity and joined churches. The only jarring note in the article is Jackson's assertion that one reason blacks became Baptists was because immersion appealed to their love of the spectacular.⁴³ He should not be forgiven this slip, however, for he cites as his authority in this matter Richard Clark Reed.

Sweet's racial attitudes seem positively benign when compared with those of Reed, a Southern church historian who published his views in 1914.⁴⁴ One would be tempted to overlook Reed's venomous attack on blacks and their religion if the material had not appeared under the aegis of The American Society of Church History. A few examples will illustrate what must have been fairly widely held attitudes.

On Africa, for example:

It is well to bear in mind that American slavery dealt with one of the lowest orders of the human family. The law of evolution, which is credited by some of our modern scientists with an energy that is well-nigh, if not altogether, equal to achieving the miracle of creation, seems to have given up its task in despair in the case of the African negro. What he was when he first emerged into the light of history that he is today, the same low savage, living usually in a state of nudity, and under the power of crude and debasing superstitions. He has never evolved any national organization, nor any system of laws, nor any settled family life.⁴⁵

Fortunately for these degraded people, white Christians took pity and offered them the gospel which they accepted even if in a perverted form. Unfortunately

Every fresh importation of Africans was adding a fresh mass of raw heathenism to the slave population, and this retarded the modifying effect of all previous efforts for their evangelization. It was like pouring a fresh tributary of muddy water into a stream that was beginning to clear. These newcomers were of mature age and would never acquire a sufficient knowledge of the English language to make it easy to reach them with religious instruction. Among them were witch doctors, medicine men, who kept alive the worst features of their native superstitions. They competed with the Christian missionaries and had the advantage of constant contact and the natural bent of the African mind. Voodooism exists to this day, and still plays an important part in the social and religious life of the negroes.⁴⁶

This is survivals with a vengeance, but Reed is one of the few people to point out this obvious example of the way the syncretism of African and Christian elements must have proceeded.

After emancipation, there was a drastic change in the picture as the

⁴³ Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760 to 1860," *Journal of Negro History*, XVI (1931), 199.

⁴⁴ Richard Clark Reed, "A Sketch of the Religious History of the Negroes in the South," in American Society of Church History, *Papers*, 2nd series, IV (1914), 177-204.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

blacks fled from white religious tutelage and organized their own churches. These churches grew at an unprecedented rate, but a regrettable development occurred simultaneously:

As soon as the negro could cast a vote, he became a shining mark for the demagogue. He furnished a fruitful field for the Northern carpet-bagger, and the Southern scalawag. These allied themselves with the negro preacher, and the church was the rallying place where they harangued their colored constituents, and fed their imaginations on illusory promises. . . . The worst result of this alliance was the effect it had on the relation between the negroes and their former masters and friends.⁴⁷

The tremendous growth of the black church since the Civil War has been effected with a significant drop in quality, Reed sadly concludes:

It is not meant that there has been an utter abandonment of the religious ideals inculcated by white preachers and teachers in the days of slavery. There are doubtless in the colored churches of the South quite a goodly number of members in the aggregate who give evidence of genuine piety. There is some preaching of the essentials of the Christian faith even by those preachers who pander most to the emotionalism of their hearers, and many through these elementary truths, notwithstanding the distracting accompaniments, catch a vision of the Christ and accept him as their Savior. But if quality be considered, these statistics of the present day do not mean what the antebellum statistics meant, when white officials weighed the evidence of conversion before admitting to membership, and applied the moral rule of the Ten Commandments in administering discipline.⁴⁸

Church history, indeed!

The American Historical Association was not far, if at all, ahead of the American Society of Church History in those years as far as racial attitudes published in its journal were concerned. In an otherwise excellent and pioneer article on the conversion of the slaves, Marcus Jernegan offered as partial explanation for the difficulties encountered in the process the following extenuations:

the belief was common that unspoiled African negroes were hardly above beasts, and the appearance of many negroes must have given ground for such a notion. Savages of the lowest types were quite different in appearance and character from the negro of the present generation, so much changed by infusion of white blood and contact with a Christian civilization.⁴⁹

And

the character and environment of the average negro was an almost insuperable obstacle to his conversion. One should remember that the negro brought with him from Africa conceptions of morality, truthfulness, and rights of property, usually quite out of harmony with the teachings of Christianity.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 196f.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁴⁹ Marcus W. Jernegan, "Religious Instruction and Conversion of Negro Slaves," *American Historical Review*, XXI (April, 1916), 517.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 519.

Jernegan may be right about the latter observation but with different implications from those he intends.

The most prominent historian of slavery in this period was Ulrich B. Phillips. His many works on plantation America have not been superseded until quite recently and much of his research forms the underlying substance of what we know about life in those days in those places. But his racial attitudes were execrable. His writing on the religion of the slaves is of a piece with his other work—much valuable information enmeshed in a thoroughly racist framework.

For Phillips, the churches which had the most appeal for the slaves were “those which relied least upon ritual and most upon exhilaration.”⁵¹ With a false gesture toward the comparative perspective, he continues:

. . . the rampant emotionalism [of the Baptists and Methodists], effective enough among the whites, was with the negroes a perfect contagion. With some of these the conversion brought lasting change, with others it provided a garment of piety to be donned with “Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes” and doffed as irksome on weekdays. With yet more it merely added to the joys of life. The thrill of exaltation would be followed by pleasurable “sin,” to give place to fresh conversion when the furor season recurred.⁵²

Phillips points out, in a section on town slaves, that blacks formed their own churches because they felt inhibited in mixed congregations. These separate churches, though permitted to exist, were often harassed by whites and sometimes physically attacked. Even though Phillips can understand the reasons blacks might want separate facilities, he disapproves:

In general, the less the cleavage of creed between master and man, the better for both, since every factor conducing to solidarity of sentiment was of advantage in promoting harmony and progress. When the planter went to sit under his rector while the slaves stayed at home to hear an exhorter, just so much was lost in the sense of fellowship. . . . On the whole, however, in spite of the contrary suggestion of irresponsible religious preachments and manifestations, the generality of the negroes everywhere realized, like the whites that virtue was to be acquired by consistent self-control in the performance of duty rather than by the alternation of spasmodic reforms and relapses.⁵³

In recognizing the failure of black religion to live up to his expectations, Phillips points out, in a chapter on “Slave Crime,” the religious dimensions of the insurrections of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey. Most interestingly, in connection with the Vesey affair, he notes that Vesey appealed with his biblical imagery and anti-slavery propaganda to the better sort of blacks, among whom were many members of the Afri-

⁵¹ Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), p. 316. First published in 1918.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

can Church, while his lieutenant, Gullah Jack, used his ability as a conjurer to attract and hold the allegiance of the "more ignorant and superstitious element."⁵⁴ In fact this is what did happen, but few historians until recently have noted it or recognized its significance as did Phillips. Religion is indeed a two-edged sword, as any historian worth his salt can plainly see, racist or not.

Not all of the writing on black religion in this period was by traditional (read racist) white historians. This was also the period of the beginning of the black history movement, led by Carter G. Woodson and followed by such black historians as Benjamin Brawley and Charles H. Wesley. Woodson's two major works, *The Negro in Our History* and *The History of the Negro Church* both went through numerous editions but were first published, respectively, in 1922 and 1921.

It is difficult to try to summarize Woodson's writing on black religion. His basic emphasis, in religion, as in everything else, is on order and intellect. While he sympathizes with the slaves in their search for emotional release through evangelical religion, he regrets that they did not attach themselves to more intellectual traditions.⁵⁵ He is much more interested in describing the development of the more highly organized churches such as the A. M. E. and A. M. E. Z. He recognizes the appeal of the Baptist way, however. In describing the ante-bellum situation, he states that:

The Negro Methodists had national organization and in most cases intelligent men making a systematic effort to extend their work. The Baptists, on the other hand, had both the disadvantages and advantages of local self-government. In their undeveloped state this unusual liberty sometimes proved to be a handicap to the Baptists in that the standard of the ministry and the moral tone of the churches were not so high as in the case of the Methodist bodies, whose conferences had power to make local churches do the right when they were not so inclined. This local self-government of the Baptists, on the other hand, made possible a more rapid increase in the number of churches established and the large influx of numbers in quest of the liberty wherewith they believed Christ had made them free.⁵⁶

In this characteristically Woodsonian paragraph, one can see the motifs which dominate throughout his evaluation of the black church. This leaves him with considerable ambivalence to the church of his own time. While he recognizes the great hold the rural church has on its members, he feels that there is too much reliance there on the minister who is likely to adopt an accommodative position on racial uplift and equal rights.⁵⁷ On the other hand,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁵⁵ Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 3rd edition (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1972), pp. 125-129. First edition published in 1921.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵⁷ Woodson, *The Negro in Our History*, p. 588.

This criticism of the Negro church does not apply altogether to congregations composed of certain intelligent groups of urban Negroes who do not represent the masses. In almost every large city there are a few churches which are conducted on the order of the most progressive congregations of the whites in the United States. . . . The majority of the Negroes in the cities, however, proceed religiously in the way of their fathers of old. A considerable number of these persons who have come under the influence of the primitive ideas of sanctification, holiness and divine healing concentrate their efforts in the store front churches of the cities which show more primitiveness than is usually found in the most backward parts of the rural districts.⁵⁸

One wonders what Woodson would say about the charismatic revival among the more intellectual white denominations today.

But lest there be any doubt about his overall opinion, Woodson asserts that: "The Negro church is the greatest asset of the race. It has been the clearing house for all other useful activities. As the Negro church is the only institution which the race in America controls, its leaders have had to use it to promote other interests. The Negro would be practically helpless today without the church."⁵⁹ That must have been slight consolation for Woodson during what he, too, clearly sees as the "dark ages" of the black church.

III 1951-1967

These years mark a transition in racial attitudes from the academic racism of an older generation of scholars to the more objective view of blacks in American life which is reflected in the work of younger historians. Certain obvious developments account in part for the change. The Supreme Court decision on the unconstitutionality of racially segregated schools injected racial struggle into the news headlines, and racism, America's "Vice that dare not speak its name," was exposed to public scrutiny and discussion. The civil rights movement dramatically confronted the white public with a heretofore obscured plea for recognition and consideration which changed into a demand for equality. "All, Here, Now" and "By Any Means Necessary" startled many whites (not to mention blacks) out of their passive acquiescence in a racial caste system. Historians were among those disturbed, and some of their work during this period reflects their changing attitudes.

One field little affected at the time by these changes, however, was the study of black religion. The conventional wisdom persisted even where the assumptions of racial inferiority dropped away. Historians of American religion who published synoptic works during these years handled the issues in either of two ways. The first was to repeat what had been said before, trying carefully to avoid the excessively judgmental racial

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 591f.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

attitudes of the past. In illustration of this position we have the work of Clifton E. Olmstead.⁶⁰

For Olmstead, blacks were attracted to the Baptist and Methodist churches because of their emotional spirituality, separate churches were organized so that blacks could have dignity, blacks had an unfortunate tendency for denominational schism, and baptism by immersion had a tremendous popular appeal.⁶¹ Of course, all these things could be said about whites as well, had Olmstead chosen to do so.

While he recognizes that blacks patterned their institutional forms and practices after whites, Olmstead asserts that there was a difference:

What was unique about the Negro's religion was its highly emotional character. Never was this more apparent than in his revivals, which elevated the soul and charmed the senses. Preaching was usually dramatic, often eloquent; at its best it possessed the happy faculty of telescoping the Biblical past with the decisive present so that Biblical characters seemed contemporary. Theology was uncomplicated and the emphasis fell upon the doctrines of sin and salvation through the free grace of Jesus Christ for all who would accept it. Singing played a dominant role in any Negro service; indeed, through music, particularly the music of the "spirituals," Negro Protestant Christianity made its most original contribution.⁶²

Nothing new here.

The other way church historians dealt with black religion during this period was just to ignore it. Brauer mentions black churches only twice, once to point out that they grew during Reconstruction and again to say that black denominations were admitted to the Federal Council of Churches.⁶³ Winthrop Hudson, in his book on American Protestantism, mentions them not at all,⁶⁴ while the Smith, Handy and Loetscher massive two volume collection contains no documents on black Christianity.⁶⁵ It cannot be said that there was not plenty of material around, for Nelson R. Burr's excellent bibliography on "The Negro Church" appeared in these years.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Clifton E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1960). Olmstead's shorter book, *Religion in America: Past and Present* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961) is a summary of the larger work which includes no additional material.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 277, 278, 407, 408.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 409.

⁶³ Jerald C. Brauer, *Protestantism in America: A Narrative History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 192, 252.

⁶⁴ Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

⁶⁵ H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher (eds.), *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*. 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

⁶⁶ Nelson R. Burr, *A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 346-381.

The traditional attitudes of white historians are represented most crudely by Samuel Eliot Morison:

The Negro was expedient. He accepted his slave status because he had to, and got as much fun out of life as he could, consoled by belief in a Heaven where no color line would be drawn. When converted to Christianity, he observed the parallel between his own bondage and that of the Israelites, and derived his most poignant spiritual hymns from the Book of Exodus. Owing to his capacity for hard work, in addition to his adaptive qualities and cheerful spirit, the Negro made an excellent slave.⁶⁷

Morison strikes an interesting note in Reconstruction history while offering a gratuitous comment on current events.

Unlike the Congolese Africans who went on a rampage in 1960 when Belgian rule was withdrawn, the Southern Negro of 1865-75 behaved like a civilized and responsible citizen. He made no attempt to repeal laws against mixed marriages or to force his way into white society; on the contrary, he formed hundreds of "African" Methodist, Baptist, and other Protestant churches.⁶⁸

This is accommodation with a vengeance. And do I misunderstand the apparently racial connotations of the comparison?

According to Daniel Boorstin: "A small compensation for the sufferings of slavery was a sharpening of the religious sentiment, which became intensely personal and naive and passionate, uncorrupted by institutions and prudential arrangements."⁶⁹ So it is not black people who are naturally religious, but slaves. Boorstin persists in this analysis by indicating that as far as black religion in the United States is concerned, the racially separate churches of the North are irrelevant. The "invisible" church which grew up under slavery had certain necessary qualities derived from the status of its members. These qualities persisted after emancipation and caused the black church to take on the configuration it has today:

Negro churches continued to be plagued by splits and secessions, by countless self-proclaimed new sects; those concerned for the religious life of the American Negro would long complain that he was "overchurched." Many of these churches continued to suffer from an autocratic ministry: men exploiting this opportunity for male dominance in an otherwise restricted world. They continued to be emotional and revivalist. And these religious communities, precisely because they were so encompassing, provided the Negro, cast adrift after emancipation, with some framework for his cultural,

⁶⁷ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 505f. This paragraph, with the alteration of a few words, is lifted from Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of The American Republic*, 5th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), Vol. I, p. 525. First edition published in 1930.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 719.

⁶⁹ Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 192.

political, and reformist efforts, some arena for leadership.⁷⁰

Boorstin to the contrary notwithstanding, this condition does not derive from slavery, otherwise how can one account for the fact that the religious life of millions of American whites can be described in the same way? His emphasis on the slave church is significant, however, even though his analysis of it is faulty.

Among black historians in these years, Benjamin Quarles is interesting in that he takes issue with Carter G. Woodson's depiction of the black minister as accommodative: "The Negro clergyman was a natural leader because his support came from the mass of people; he was therefore in a position to speak more frankly on their behalf than a Negro leader whose job required that he have the good will of the white community."⁷¹ While he maybe correct, Quarles seems to be voicing a hope rather than a conclusion based on his data. Indeed, his comment follows several pages of criticism of the black ministry as poor, illiterate, and untrained, leading their churches in services which "tended to become intensely emotional, with trances and weird singing."⁷²

The most widely used textbook in the teaching of black history is John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom*. In the 1967 edition, Franklin gives full coverage to important aspects of religion. He stresses the collective nature of African religion, the growth of the independent black church at the turn of the nineteenth century, and the rapid expansion of the African Baptist and Methodist churches in the post-bellum period. As is the case with so many scholars in the field, however, he flounders when he reaches the twentieth century and is weak on slave religion.

For the slaves, Franklin avers, religion served as emotional release (as it did for rural whites) and a means of escaping from the brutality of slavery, at least philosophically, into a spiritual world of freedom.⁷³

The church of the Progressive Era, for Franklin, did not go the way Woodson indicates but was "effectively challenged by a rising progressive element, which refused to accept the crude notions of Biblical interpretation and the 'grotesque vision of the hereafter' portrayed by the conservatives."⁷⁴ The churches then began to serve increasingly as social welfare agencies for moral and social uplift. Clearly we need a lot more research on the black church of the early twentieth century before we can come to any assured conclusion about its posture.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁷¹ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York: Collier Books, 1964), p. 162.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁷³ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3rd edition (New York: Knopf, 1967), pp. 200, 207. First edition published in 1947.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

In his discussion of the post Second World War period, Franklin indicates that the rise of the Nation of Islam was indicative of the alienation of blacks from American culture: "The religious group undertook, modestly enough, to offer encouragement and some security to the unemployed, disinherited Negroes who had sought in vain for some sign of faith in them on the part of the larger community."⁷⁵ Franklin is almost alone among scholars in emphasizing the religious underpinnings of the Black Muslims.

Franklin sums up his understanding of the place of the church in the Afro-American community in words which strike one as more poignant than triumphant:

Perhaps the most powerful institution in the Negro's world is the church. Barred as he was from many areas of social and political life, the Negro turned more and more to the church for self-expression, recognition, and leadership. Nothing in his world was so completely his own as his church. Early in the century church membership grew as it had in the post-Reconstruction period. Negroes migrated to the cities, old denominations increased in membership, and new denominations sprang up. It was an exhilarating experience for Negroes to participate in the ownership and control of their own institutions. It stimulated their pride and preserved the self-respect of many who had been humiliated in their efforts to adjust themselves in American life.⁷⁶

During the 1950's and '60's American historians began to produce a series of scholarly monographs on aspects of black history which sought, and, to a large extent, achieved, racial objectivity. Several of these dealt peripherally with black religion. At least two groups of these books dealt with areas where Franklin was weakest.

The first group consists of three works of urban history.⁷⁷ Although two of the books state categorically that the church was the dominant institution of the ghetto,⁷⁸ they provide little useful material in helping us arrive at coherent generalizations. In fact, in certain matters they merely lend confusion. Scheiner, for example, says that the church was declining in influence, while Osofsky asserts its influence "increased phenomenally."⁷⁹ Another point on which there is significant disagreement is the nature of storefront religion. Spear is surely correct when he describes the increase in storefront churches as a result of migration and

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 560.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 561.

⁷⁷ Seth M. Scheiner, *Negro Mecca: A History of the Negro in New York City, 1865-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 1965); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto; Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); and Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

⁷⁸ Spear, *op. cit.*, p. 91; Scheiner, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁷⁹ Scheiner, *op. cit.*, p. 87; Osofsky, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

an increasing class differentiation in the black community.⁸⁰ Scheiner, on the other hand, believes that the storefronts grew out of disputes within older churches and competition for leadership roles.⁸¹ Osofsky is not really interested in the question because "most of these preachers were probably charlatans in some form."⁸² One thing that all three books demonstrate amply, however, is that there was a sizeable lower stratum of society untouched by Franklin's apparently successful institutional churches.

The major works on aspects of slavery written during these years, while considerably enriching our historical knowledge of the peculiar institution, tell us little that is new about slave religion. Stanley Elkins, for example, is as contemptuous of slave religion as he is of other aspects of slave culture: "[Slave religion], treated sympathetically, reveals its own plane of dignity and much depth of feeling, yet its loftiest manifestation still remains at about the level of *Green Pastures*."⁸³

Richard Wade's study of the urban slaves of the South provides much information about slave churches, but his explanation of why the slaves were religious harks back to an earlier time:

... the need [for religion] was deep, for slavery had stripped them of any meaningful pattern of life beyond that of the master and their bondage. The family could furnish none. No tradition could provide roots into a history without servitude. Neither today nor tomorrow offered any expectation of a life without the present stigma. Deprived of nostalgia for the past and unable to discover any real meaning in the present, the blacks sought relief and consolation in a distant time. In the church, with their own kind, amid songs of redemption and the promises of Paradise, a life-line could be thrown into the future.⁸⁴

Wade needs a healthy dose of the comparative perspective, else how will he explain the evidently equally felt need for religion on the part of the whites who responded to the emotional appeal of frontier religion?

The work written in this period one would naturally turn to in order to learn about slave religion is Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution*, until 1974 considered the standard work on slavery by contemporary American historians. While Stampp's book is excellent in many ways, it is admittedly weak on slave culture. And we certainly find it not only lacking but seriously flawed in its analysis of slave religion.

For Stampp, the religion the African brought with him consisted of a world "inhabited by petulant spirits whose demands had to be gratified;

⁸⁰ Spear, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

⁸¹ Scheiner, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁸² Osofsky, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

⁸³ Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p.195n.

⁸⁴ Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 162f.

his relationship to these spirits was regulated by the rituals and dogmas of his pagan faith."⁸⁵ No mention of the spiritual importance of the kinship network of African people which, in spite of almost insurmountable difficulties, got itself transplanted here.

The slaves embraced evangelical Christianity, according to Stamp, because they needed a "vigorous" faith, one which took them out of bondage and offered them hope for the future.⁸⁶ Stamp agrees that, except for the bondage, the same reasons led whites on the same way. In fact, "the religion of the slaves was, in essence, strikingly similar to that of the poor, illiterate white men of the ante-bellum South."⁸⁷ Stamp seems overly impressed with the inconsistency and emotionalism of black and white religion alike. This leads him to overemphasize, by citing prejudiced sources, the inadequacies of slave religion.

The most valuable new work done in this period on slave religion appears in the chapter entitled "The Church and the Negro" in Leon Litwack's study of Northern blacks before the Civil War.⁸⁸ He rightly notes the predominance of ministers in the racial elite of the period:

Both a politician and a spiritual leader, the Negro minister frequently used his position and prestige to arouse his congregations on issues affecting their civil rights as well as their morals; he not only condemned colonization, segregation, and disenfranchisement, but persistently attacked "licentious literature," the immoral and corrupting influence of the theater, infidelity, and atheism.⁸⁹

The outstanding leadership of some of the black clergy during the ante-bellum years has led some to romanticize the church of those years as more of a protect movement.⁹⁰ Litwack reminds us that, in fact, there was considerable ambivalence and even the adoption of an accommodating attitude toward white dominance on the part of some of the churches.⁹¹ Another point often neglected in these days of increasing black consciousness is that the very existence of a separate black church was opposed by men like Frederick Douglass who criticized the institution in these words quoted by Litwack: "If there be any good reason for a colored church, the same will hold good in regard to a colored school, and indeed to every other institution founded on complexion".⁹²

Before leaving this period mention should be made of three books

⁸⁵ Kenneth M. Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution, Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956), p. 371.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

⁸⁸ Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 187-213.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁹⁰ Cone, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-103.

⁹¹ Litwack, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁹² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 212.

which deal with aspects of white Protestantism's relationship with blacks. All of the books agree that separate churches are a scandal for Christianity and assume that when racial prejudice dies the body of Christ will be racially one.⁹³ I doubt whether we will ever have the opportunity to test their assertion.

IV 1968-1976

This period has seen a veritable explosion of writings on black religion. Leading in this movement have been religiously committed black scholars. In an effort to coordinate their research these churchmen formed the Society for the Study of Black Religion in 1971. Examples of this new black scholarship can be found in the volume on *The Black Experience in Religion*, edited by C. Eric Lincoln.⁹⁴ Historians have provided little of this work; Lincoln's volume contains only two selections by historians, neither trained or working in the mainstream of the profession. Certainly the best general treatment of the history of the black church comes from this movement, but Gayraud Wilmore, the author of *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, is a professor of social ethics.⁹⁵

Historians have responded to the movement for a black church, however, and movement writings have had a significant effect in altering the tone and the substance of studies of black religion in the past decade.

I have selected 1968 as the watershed year in the attitudes of historians toward black religion because of the appearance that year of two significant essays. The first is Handy's analysis of the failings of American church historians in the area of the black church, and the second is a bold assessment of the changed mood of religious blacks by historian and activist Vincent Harding.⁹⁶

For Harding the movement for black power is in effect a new "church", borrowing many of the cultural forms of the old religion but pushing forward toward love and justice.⁹⁷ For the time being, Harding avers, the white church is simply irrelevant to black people and should be

⁹³ David M. Reimers, *White protestantism and the Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro—A History* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1966).

⁹⁴ C. Eric Lincoln (ed.), *The Black Experience in Religion* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974).

⁹⁵ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1972).

⁹⁶ Vincent Harding, "The Religion of Black Power," in Donald Cutler (ed.), *The Religious Situation—1968* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 3-38.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

ignored, not opposed.⁹⁸ Then, perhaps, in the long run

If [the Kingdom] comes, it may come only for those who seek it for its own sake and for the sake of its Lord, recognizing that even if he is black, the final glory is not the glory of blackness, but a setting straight of all the broken men and communities of the earth.⁹⁹

Unfortunately, the length of this paper and the vast number of works to be surveyed in this section make it impossible to do justice to any single author. The analysis that follows, then, will attempt to mention the most important works and attempt to group them where possible around a single theme. In this way the major issues can be touched on; the ready availability of the books and articles to be considered makes it possible for the reader to pursue his own interests there.

Having said this I must now attempt some brief evaluation of Sydney Ahlstrom's massive and magisterial *Religious History of the American People*. Suffice it to say that Ahlstrom gives extensive coverage to black religion, maintaining throughout a carefully articulated comparative perspective. Interestingly, he sees the most important influence of black piety on American religious history to be in the development of Pentecostalism, a movement almost entirely avoided or merely deplored by most historians, religious or secular.¹⁰⁰

In the opening pages of his work Ahlstrom, echoing Handy, asserts that:

The basic paradigm for a renovation of American church history is the black religious experience, which has been virtually closed out of all synoptic histories written so far—closed out despite the obvious fact that any history of American that ignores the full consequences of slavery and non-emancipation is a fairy tale, and that the black churches have been the chief bearers of the Afro-American heritage from early nineteenth-century revivals to the present day.¹⁰¹

Attempting to carry out this mandate, Ahlstrom admits, correctly, that his efforts are preliminary.¹⁰² But they are far and away the best effort we have available to place the black church in the general context of American religious history.

Vincent Harding's notion of the redemptive possibilities of black religion finds its counterpart among several of the writers of synoptic histories of American religion of the past decade. Clebsch, Marty, Handy and Hudson all include the by now obligatory references to the black church, but point out in addition that white Christians would do well to heed

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁰ Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 1059f.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12f.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 699n.

certain aspects of that tradition if they would save their souls and clarify their missions.¹⁰³ Clebsch, for example, asserts:

For the denominational leaders and local ministers, worried by white Christianity's domestication that betokens both neglect of its gospel and irrelevance to the critical affairs of the country, have come near to coveting the Negro churches' facility for clinging to certain essential points of Christian teaching—love, brotherhood, personhood, justice, equality—while maintaining poignant relevance to the basic concern of their members and of the nation.¹⁰⁴

Marty concludes, however, that the price for this continuing witness has been very high for both groups.¹⁰⁵

Among the important subjects in black religious history that have been dealt with in these years is the rise of independent churches among ante-bellum free blacks. Three major studies which deal with this topic are Carol George's book on the emergence of the African Methodist churches, Ira Berlin's exhaustive investigation of free Southern blacks, and Milton Sernett's survey of black religious institutions.¹⁰⁶ A basic question all of these authors concern themselves with is the nature of the impulse to form separate churches. Was it merely a defensive move reacting to white discrimination or was there a proto-nationalist thrust? George takes her point of departure explicitly from the black theology of James Cone and others:

[Richard Allen] seemed to conclude that a separate and independent black church, served by black clergymen, could provide the most effective mission to Afro-Americans by utilizing not only its physical resources of buildings, committees, and such, but by also invoking the powerful philosophical resource implicit in a theology of liberation.¹⁰⁷

Sernett, on the other hand, rejects out of hand any nationalist thrust in Allen's movement.¹⁰⁸ He accepts at face value the reasons for separa-

¹⁰³ William A. Clebsch, *From Sacred to Profane America: The Role of Religion in American History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970); Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America*, 2nd edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), first edition published in 1965.

¹⁰⁴ Clebsch, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

¹⁰⁵ Marty, *op. cit.*, p. 32f.

¹⁰⁶ Carol V. R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1975).

¹⁰⁷ George, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Sernett, *op. cit.*, p. 126. For an explicitly black nationalist justification of Allen's secession, see John H. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (eds.), *Black National-*

tion given by the black Methodists, reasons which were clearly calculated to mollify the ruffled feelings of the white Methodist leadership of the parent church.

In dealing with the South, Berlin is cautious in explaining the reasons for separation, linking them with the shift in the white evangelical churches from an antislavery to a proslavery stance. More important for Berlin are the uses to which the free blacks put their institutions:

The growth of the free Negro caste allowed Afro-Americans the first opportunity to express themselves unfettered by the shackles of slavery. The new names they chose, their pattern of mobility, and the institutions they created reveal how far transplanted Africans had come in assimilating to American life. Yet free Negroes called their churches African churches and their schools African schools. Within these institutions the new Afro-American culture flourished. The growth of the free Negro caste marks nothing less than the emergence of that culture.¹⁰⁹

So, for Berlin, the black church is not merely a reactive movement but an aggressive formulator of a distinctive culture.

Through the work of these historians and others dealing with the period we are beginning to get a fuller picture of the religious life of the free blacks and the leadership role carried out by black ministers not only in their own churches but in the wider community.¹¹⁰

Among the general works by historians of American black life which should be mentioned because of the attention they pay to religion are the massive historical bibliography compiled by James M. McPherson along with his colleagues at Princeton and the excellent interpretive textbook on black history by August Meier and Elliott Rudwick.¹¹¹ The McPherson book contains three sections of bibliography on black religion with introductory material and annotations. In the latest edition of the Meier and Rudwick textbook considerable new material on religion has been added, reflecting the scholarship being discussed here.

The increased importance of black religion has even been noticed by the authors (and publishers) of American history survey textbooks. The 1975 edition of Garraty, the most widely used book in the field, includes a pictorial essay on the African heritage, the text of which discusses briefly African religion, an increased appreciation of possible African influences in black religion, and an extensive and laudatory section on the

ism in America (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1970), pp. 3-13.

¹⁰⁹ Berlin, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

¹¹⁰ For examples of this last point, see Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Jane H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974); and Lawrence A. Jones, "They Sought a City: The Black Church and Churchmen in the Nineteenth Century," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* (Spring, 1971), 253-272.

¹¹¹ James M. McPherson, et al., *Blacks in America: Bibliographical Essays* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1971) and Meier and Rudwick, *op. cit.*

religious and racial leadership of Malcolm X.¹¹² None of this material was in the free edition. Other major texts reflect the same kind of editorial changes in recent editions.¹¹³

In 1969 Vincent Harding called attention to the neglect that historians had shown toward ante-bellum black religion, particularly as it related to resistance and rebellion.¹¹⁴ This seminal essay, while not denying the conservative aspects of black religion, stressed the notion "that there were significant, identifiable black responses to religion which often stormed beyond submissiveness to defiance."¹¹⁵ Many of the historians we have discussed in this paper have remarked on the religious aspects of the insurrections of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. But for most the religious dimensions of these movements have been seen as aberrant; Harding now puts them in the mainstream of black religion where they are likely to remain.

In the field of Afro-American religion it has been the area of slave religion, both quiescent and defiant, which has been illuminated most thoroughly by recent historians. Important for their understanding of slavery and particularly aspects of slave culture has been the adoption of new methodological approaches. Primary among these has been an increased facility in handling folk materials. Lawrence Levine, in an important article discussing the communal nature of the creation of the "spirituals," states the problem:

Negroes in the United States, both during and after slavery, were anything but inarticulate. They sang songs, told stories, played verbal games, listened and responded to sermons, and expressed their aspirations, fears, and values through the medium of an oral tradition that had characterized the West African cultures from which their ancestors had come. By largely ignoring this tradition, much of which has been preserved, historians have rendered an articulate people historically inarticulate, and have allowed the record of their consciousness to go unexplored.¹¹⁶

Thanks to Levine and others this situation is rapidly changing.

An increasingly sophisticated anthropological approach, utilizing theo-

¹¹² John A. Garraty, *The American Nation*, 3rd edition, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), Vol. I, pp. P1-5, 245; Vol. II, p. 845. First edition published in 1966.

¹¹³ See, for example, John M. Blum, et al., *The National Experience: A History of the United States*, 3rd edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), p. 202. First edition published in 1963. Also see Richard Hofstadter, et al., *The United States*, 4th edition, 2 vols. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), Vol. I, pp. 243f. First edition published in 1957.

¹¹⁴ Vincent Harding, "Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Negroes, 1800-1860," in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (eds.), *The Making of Black America*, Vol. I (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 179.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹¹⁶ Lawrence W. Levine, "Slave Songs and Slave consciousness: An Exploration in Neglected Sources," in Tamara K. Hareven (ed.), *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 99.

ries of language and cultural transmission, is enabling historians to analyze more effectively the influence of the African heritage on the early slaves.¹¹⁷

Most important of all in the new understanding of slavery, however, is the recognition that the slaves were people. Not only were they people but they had a community—ironically, the masters saw to that. John Blassingame describes the importance of this realization:

The most important aspect of . . . group identification was that slaves were not solely dependent on the white man's cultural frames of reference for their ideals and values. As long as the plantation black had cultural norms and ideals, ways of verbalizing aggression, and roles in his life largely free from his master's control, he could preserve some personal autonomy, and resist infantilization, total identification with planters, and internalization of unflattering stereotypes calling for abject servility. The slave's culture bolstered his self-esteem, courage, and confidence, and served as his defense against personal degradation.¹¹⁸

For Blassingame, religion was a major factor in this culture complex. The slaves believed in a God who was alive and active in history—a God of justice and freedom, who had past experience in leading slaves out of bondage.¹¹⁹

In describing the religious context of Nat Turner's upbringing, Stephen Oates explains further the slave's pragmatic theology:

[It is] a different version of Christianity from what the white man offered, an alternate version that condemned slavery and fueled resistance to it. This was black religion—an amalgam of African mythology and Christian doctrines as slaves interpreted them, a unique religion that embodied the essence of the slaves' lives—their frustrations and sorrows, their memories, and their fantasies about a future world without whips and masters. . . . Here they could find comfort and courage in a black man's God, an animated Spirit, a *presence* who was with them every moment of their lives.¹²⁰

Throughout the description of Turner's preparation for his apocalyptic role, Oates takes Nat's mystical experiences as authentic, the true governing force in his life.

Another side of the role of black religion in rebellion is presented by Gerald Mullin in his study of Gabriel Prosser's abortive revolt. He accounts for Gabriel's failure by pointing to his refusal to use religious fervor to stir up his followers. "Unlike Nat Turner's magnificent Old Testament visions, which transfigured him and sustained his movement,

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina, From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974).

¹¹⁸ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 76.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹²⁰ Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 28f. (Mentor paperback.)

Gabriel's Rebellion, lacking a sacred dimension, was without a Moses, and thus without a following."¹²¹

The most important study of slave religion to appear in this decade and one which is unlikely to be surpassed for some time is found in Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.¹²² The very title of the book suggests the importance the author places on the material. In the course of this work, Genovese corrects many of the prior misconceptions of black religion while building an impressive structure of belief and practice which he asserts served the slaves well but left an ambiguous legacy. I can only suggest here some of the major thrusts of Genovese's approach and recommend that they be pursued into the text itself by the reader.

Genovese begins at the beginning, with a general theory of religion and its specific application to slave life:

The religion of Afro-American slaves, like all religion, grew as a way of ordering the world and of providing a vantage point from which to judge it. Like all religion it laid down a basis for moral conduct and an explanation for the existence of evil and injustice. The religion of the slaves manifested many African "traits" and exhibited greater continuity with African ideas than has generally been appreciated. But it reflected a different reality in a vastly different land and in the end emerged as something new.¹²³

Religion is a collective enterprise, which meant for the slave a communal experience using the strength of the collective will to support an autonomous culture. For example, the importance of funerals in the slaves' religious life was found in "the extent to which they allowed the participants to feel themselves a human community unto themselves. To that extent the slaves decisively negated the mythical foundation of the slaveholders' world."¹²⁴

In his discussion of the "folk religion" of the slaves, Genovese asserts that the most important aspect of African religion which sustained itself in slavery was "an irrepressible affirmation of life" which continually amazed the whites and has for generations misled scholars of the phenomenon.¹²⁵ The development of separate churches away from whites permitted the folk beliefs of the slaves to merge with traditional Christian beliefs and prevented the folk religion from becoming an anti-Christian movement among the people and thereby strengthened the collective rather than serving as divisive.¹²⁶

¹²¹ Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 160.

¹²² Eugene W. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), pp. 161-284.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

The ambiguous legacy of the slave church is that it "laid the foundations of protonational consciousness and at the same time stretched a universalist offer of forgiveness and ultimate reconciliation to white America. . . ."¹²⁷ According to Genovese, then, it was the Afro-American's acceptance of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation which prevented the church from forming the nucleus for a political movement toward equality in the face of white opposition in the years after the Civil War. And it was Vincent Harding's plea that the church drop this position as strategically unsound during "the interim" that heralded the development of the movement⁶ for a black church which has proven so influential both in the life of those churches and in the world of historical scholarship.

Conclusion

The preliminary research on which this paper is based ends with the middle nineteen-seventies. At that time, particularly with the appearance of Genovese's Study of slavery, it became no longer possible for serious historians of the black experience to ignore the religious dimension. Nor was it possible for historians of American religion to avoid dealing with black spirituality, both traditional and non-traditional. In the past decade several works have been published which indicate that the scholarly world is ready to take seriously a reevaluation of the development of Afro-American religion and the ambiguous role this force has played in both our national and group life.¹²⁸

Important areas still remain where historical (or any other) scholarship needs to be applied before we get anything like a picture of the vitality and variety of black religious life.

First, we need to know a great deal more about the black church during Reconstruction. We have been told that there was tremendous growth and that the black churches worked alongside the white in educational programs. But if Reed and Sweet were correct in their hostile comments about the political role of the black church in those years, their conclusions would serve as a partial corrective to those of Genovese.

We also need to reexamine the church during the "dary ages". I sus-

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 284. For another interpretation of the doctrine of reconciliation in slave theology, see Timothy L. Smith, "Slavery and Theology: The Emergence of Black Christian Consciousness in Nineteenth Century America," *Church History*, XLI (1972), 497-512.

¹²⁸ See, for example, Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution on the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Walter L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

pect that much of the material we have is badly distorted because of the accomodationist presuppositions of the research. It is not enough merely to evaluate the religious life of a people on the basis of their social activism along one variable. We must be careful in this case, also, to be thoroughly comparative in our method.¹²⁹

In reevaluating black religion in the twentieth century, scholars must take a new approach toward non-mainstream religious movements such as the African Orthodox (Garveyite) Church, the Nation of Islam, or Father Divine's Peace Mission.¹³⁰ No longer can these groups be seen as abberant or simply bizarre, as has so often been the case in the past. As authentic voices of black spirituality, they must be studied with care and sympathetic understanding.

I have already mentioned that we need a comprehensive study of the black church and urbanization. Jon Butler pointed the way with his analysis of the churches of St. Paul.¹³¹ If his conclusions are correct, the church was an important institution for only a small segment of the urban black population, those family-oriented and upwardly mobile.

We need more critical biographies of black religious leaders along the lines of David Lewis' and Stephen Oates' studies of Martin Luther King, Jr. No hagiography, please. Works on such men as Henry Turner,¹³² Henry Highland Garnet, Francis Grimke, or Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. would vastly enrich our perception of the ambiguous role of the black minister in the changing, ever changing, church.

Finally, someone has to explore the role of women in the black religious tradition. It seems fairly certain that women have made up the majority of church attendees, at least since slavery days. What can we learn about these women and their relationship to the tradition? Feminist scholarship is beginning to show us the way here, but the major work is before us.¹³³

That is enough for now. The job will never be completed, but the more historians apply themselves to this task the less we will hear about those

¹²⁹ See, for example, Ahlstrom, *op. cit.*, p. 713.

¹³⁰ Good examples of the recommended approach are Robert Weisbrot, *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983) and Randall K. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement: The Institutionalization of a Black Civil Religion* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1978).

¹³¹ Jon Butler, "Communities and Congregations: The Black Church in St. Paul, 1860-1900", *Journal of Negro History*, LVI (1971), 133f.

¹³² For an excellent study of one aspect of Turner's ministry, see Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

¹³³ An interesting beginning can be found in the relevant chapters of Jean Friedman's new book, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

"incurably religious" blacks and the more we will understand the manifold forms that spirituality takes in this complex and mysterious world of ours.

The first part of the book is devoted to a general history of the United States from its discovery to the present time. It is written in a clear and concise style, and is well adapted for use in schools and colleges.

The second part of the book is devoted to a detailed history of the United States from the discovery to the present time. It is written in a clear and concise style, and is well adapted for use in schools and colleges.

The third part of the book is devoted to a detailed history of the United States from the discovery to the present time. It is written in a clear and concise style, and is well adapted for use in schools and colleges.

The fourth part of the book is devoted to a detailed history of the United States from the discovery to the present time. It is written in a clear and concise style, and is well adapted for use in schools and colleges.

The fifth part of the book is devoted to a detailed history of the United States from the discovery to the present time. It is written in a clear and concise style, and is well adapted for use in schools and colleges.

The sixth part of the book is devoted to a detailed history of the United States from the discovery to the present time. It is written in a clear and concise style, and is well adapted for use in schools and colleges.

The seventh part of the book is devoted to a detailed history of the United States from the discovery to the present time. It is written in a clear and concise style, and is well adapted for use in schools and colleges.

The eighth part of the book is devoted to a detailed history of the United States from the discovery to the present time. It is written in a clear and concise style, and is well adapted for use in schools and colleges.

The ninth part of the book is devoted to a detailed history of the United States from the discovery to the present time. It is written in a clear and concise style, and is well adapted for use in schools and colleges.