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African American Religion in the United States of America: An Interpretative Essay¹

Charles H. Long

ABSTRACT: This essay addresses the problematical nature of the meaning of religion as it is related to the formation and destiny of peoples of African descent in the United States. Moving beyond a narrow understanding of the nature of religion as expressed in much of Black Theology, for example, this essay proposes a “thick” and complex depiction of religion in the African American context through a recognition of its relationship to the contact and conquest that marked the modern world.

CHARACTERIZATIONS

Since the publication of Professor James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969, there has been a steady publication of books and articles by him and his students defining African American religion within the orders of a Christian theology. These texts have been important in adding a theological dimension to the meaning of black cultural historical life. Before the advent of Black Theology, it was the tradition of African American sociologists undertaking the task of critique of American society who, in so doing, provided a meaningful structure for an ameliorative form for African American communities in the United States. As sociologists they operated out of an empirical epistemology and had little use for religious meaning except as an institutional and often a residual form of African American life.

While Black Theology hailed a new beginning for the study of the

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religion of African Americans in the United States, it was clear that from one point of view Black Theology was a Black Church Christian Theology. This raised a number of issues as it related to the ranges of black historical experience and its cultural religious life. In the first instance, black churches did not appear in North America until the latter decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, and even then, in very selected regions of the United States. What of the religious life of African peoples in North America before this time? While black churches were often the center of social life for the community, by virtue of their ordering in terms of various Christian forms, all modes of black religion were not brought into the black church. In addition, we know from historical data that before Emancipation, black churches in the North often emerged from a prior organization of freed black persons, commonly known as African Societies.

Black Theology had to come to terms with the rise of African American Muslim communities and forms of Afrocentric meanings and communities in the United States. Furthermore, black theologians themselves found that they were increasingly turning to wider ranges of data for interpretation, e.g., slave narratives, black music traditions, rituals, literature, etc. Thus, the issue was whether the style and form of a Black Christian Theology were adequate for a profound understanding of the religious life of African peoples in North America.

Now given these wide ranges of data and methods, it is not easy to characterize in a precise manner the nature of African American religion in the United States. C. Eric Lincoln echoes this situation in his description of black religion. In one of his studies he says, "black religion is not simply white religion in blackface, neither is black religion a formal denomination with a structured doctrine." It is rather, says Lincoln,

an attitude, a movement. . . . It represents the desire of Blacks to be self-conscious of black people about the meaning of their blackness and to search for spiritual fulfillment in terms of their understanding of themselves and their experience of their history. . . . Black religion, then, cuts across denominational, cult, and sect lines to do for black people what other religions have not done: to assume the black man's humanity, his relevance, his responsibility, his participation, and his right to see himself as the image of God.²

In a later work, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya present us with six dialectical models for an understanding of the black church—models which might be easily applied in the case of black religion. They are as follows: 1) the dialectic between the priestly and prophetic functions; 2) the dialectic between the other-worldly versus the this-worldly; 3) the dialectic between universalism and particularism; 4) the dialectic

tic between the communal versus the privatistic; 5) the dialectic between the charismatic versus the bureaucratic; and 6) the dialectic between resistance versus accommodation.³

We should consider the above remarks in light of David Wills' statement that, "The study of African American religious history still lacks an obvious entry point for persons seeking an obvious orientation to the field."⁴ After stating the problematic of African American religious history, Wills goes on to suggest three models for the study of this religion. They are: 1) Pluralism and Toleration; 2) The Southern Encounter; and 3) The Encounter of Black and White from the Evangelical Wakening to the Present. It is obvious that much of the complex nature of African American religion is due not only to the peculiar situation of blacks within the culture of the United States, but equally to their formative meaning in the creation of the modern world itself. This accounts for Lincoln's statement that African American religion is a "movement" that cuts across denominations, cults, and sects. There is thus a very essential existential element in the nature of this religion. This accounts for the appearance of James Cone's initial work during the Civil Rights movement and within a context defined by that movement and the activities of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

LEGACIES AND SOURCES

It is obvious that the problematical nature of African American religion is due to the fact of the enslavement of African peoples in North America. Slavery is an old human institution practiced by most of the ancient civilizations in various parts of the world. The slavery introduced in North America at this juncture of history was an anomaly. Even before the creation of the American Republic, the religious impulses of the Protestant Reformation expressed strong sentiments for the possibility that the human mode of being could define a meaning of self-determination that carried the meaning of freedom for ordinary persons. More than this was the advent of the American Republic through a revolution that stated its fundamental meaning in terms of the "birth of freedom" as coincidental with the founding of the Republic. There was, however, neither the eradication of the institution of slavery nor the emancipation of those enslaved. The American Republic at its moment of founding created the impossible dilemma of embracing and sustaining the institution of chattel slavery within a revolutionary democracy.

Chattel slavery is thus one of the general characteristics of the situation that defined and contained the meaning of Africans in the North American milieu. While being an institution legitimated in all parts of the United States at its inception, slavery was particularized in various regions of the country and differed in its relationship to the labor as

dictated by the environmental and economic motivations. Into the more general characteristics of slavery, several complex meanings and relationships emerged. Enslaved Africans had to learn the empirical and cultural languages and styles of those who owned them; they had to find ways to make use of and enhance whatever forms, techniques, and memories of their land of origin, and over time, they had to find ways of teaching and accepting newly-enslaved Africans within their slave communities. Sterling Stuckey has described the way in which enslaved Africans introduced newly-enslaved Africans into the North American community of Africans through the African ritual forms of the “ring shout.” In this movement they created simultaneously a new form of African-ness while becoming Americans.⁵

Lawrence Jones coined the phrase, “they overheard the Gospel,” in describing the reception of Christianity among the enslaved Africans. This eavesdropping was not, however, limited to the Gospel; it included the secret transmission of the entire American ideology of freedom, government, economics, etc. And in this secret hearing a new and different understanding of modernity was being transmitted. Thus there was forming not only a new American community among the slaves but another understanding and interpretation of America itself. On the specific level of religion, Albert Raboteau, Mechal Sobel, and Sylvia Frey have explored the actuality of this transmission and transformation of an American meaning among the enslaved.⁶

Because slaves, masters, and mistresses lived within the same spatial milieu and shared economic systems, they shared a rich communication. This communication was not on an egalitarian level, however, for the slave could hardly initiate and define the terrain of communicative exchanges. This fact has made for some confusion and given a sense of a common tradition stemming from the enslaved persons and their owners. Eugene Genovese, employing a Gramscian interpretation of hegemony, has portrayed this in terms of “The World the Slaves made,” and Mechal Sobel as “The world they made together.”⁷ There was a kind of objective world created by the institution of slavery, but it was neither acknowledged nor known by the participants in the same manner. In the words of Ashis Nandy, within the slave system, regardless and in spite of the feelings of the participants, slaves and their owners had to remain, at best, “intimate enemies.”

Overt and implicit violence was endemic to the institution of slavery, and though slave owners might have among themselves found it necessary to limit and regularize this violence, the very threat of violence was the terror that underlay the system of slavery itself. Violence within the institution of slavery was legitimated when perpetrated by the owners but never legitimized if practiced by the slaves unless under direct orders from the owner, and then, never against a person or persons who were not slaves. Slaves knew that they could also undertake the use of

violence, and throughout the period of American enslavement there were instances of individual and collective violence against the slave systems by slaves. There are also several instances in which escaped slaves created their own maroon communities or took refuge with Native Americans.⁸

Enslaved Africans, forbidden to read or write, have not left an extensive written record. Access to their lives and experiences come by way of oral traditions that contain their testimony. I am using the term “testimony” as it has gained parlance in the works of Latina/o scholars. “Testimonio” means “to tell a personal story that contains a message from a subordinated group involved in a political struggle”; it is experience as knowledge that motivates the telling and retelling of testimony.⁹ For African Americans, these testimonies in the form of oral traditions bear witness to a meaning of time and space that has been hidden from the official ideological accounts of the story of the Republic.

One of the first and most extensive archives of these kinds of testimonials was that undertaken by the Works Progress Administration between 1936 and 1938. These consist of 194 interviews of former enslaved African Americans. John W. Blassingame has also compiled a volume of oral tradition of African Americans. In his introduction, Blassingame provides an excellent discussion concerning the critical and hermeneutical principles for understanding these testimonials.¹⁰ Oral tradition and its testimonies become “sites of memory.” The most general site of this memory for African Americans are those “places of terror”—spaces where through enslavement they came to know and experience this land. It is through stories and story-telling that these “memories” are re-membered and imagined as knowledge and resources for redemptive transformations. These memories play an important role in the work of many black novelists. We see this especially in Toni Morrison’s novels and in Ralph Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man*, as well as in his volumes of essays.

Black music was the other expression of the oral tradition as “testimonio.” Whether from the “spirituals” or the “blues” traditions, this music and its musicians represent one of the most powerful and distinctive expressions of America as informed by the African American presence. The music not only speaks of the condition of Africans in the United States, it takes on social, psychological, and economic meanings within the wider culture of African Americans. John Lovell Jr.’s monumental study of the spirituals is an example of the impact of this music tradition. Miles Mark Fisher interpreted the spirituals as simultaneously expressing Christian meanings while sending subversive signals relating to escape from slavery. Douglas Daniel, working as a historian, has shown how the African American music tradition not only accompanied and in some cases preceded the migratory movements of blacks throughout the

country but also served equally as a mode of communication between musicians and disparate communities.¹¹

REORIENTATION IN THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION

If we follow closely C. Eric Lincoln's descriptive definition of black religion we are able to justify the ranges of data that contribute to its formulation. While the Christian denominational churches form a major and definitive meaning of black religion, black religion is not limited to this expression. This problem has been brought to light in a recent publication by Douglas R. Egerton. Egerton's work is a study of Gabriel Prosser's rebellion. While Egerton noted that several authors attributed Prosser's slave rebellion to Christian motivation, he could find no basis for any form of Christian interpretation in the impetus of Prosser. The interpreters had noted that there was a religious element and seriousness in the motivations of Prosser and thus attributed this element in an unwarranted manner to the Christian faith.¹²

In recent interpretation, Africa and the African meanings retained by the slaves have been seen as sources of the religious sentiment among African Americans. If, therefore, Prosser's motivations were religious, but not Christian, it seems that the African element is the only source remaining. Now, these two bases for the sources of the religious sentiment of the Africans enslaved in America have been seen as both dichotomous and simultaneous sources of the religion of African Americans. Instead of attempting to resolve this issue in the terms of the binary presented, it might prove salutary if we resituated the discussion.

First of all let us extract the meanings which might be gained from an examination of the term "religion" itself. Our word "religion" is from two Latin words, "*religio*" and "*religare*." The first meaning carries the sense of "seriousness," things done with gravity; the second meaning is the infinitive "to bind"; binding as the simple act of tying together, but on the social level, the acts, rituals and forms that bind together the exchanges of social life as in weddings, or those ritual acts and meanings that bind together a people or a nation. Whether we use either meaning, it is clear that these notions of religion conform to Lincoln's understanding of black religion. In other words, a religious dimension seems to be coincidental to the presence, sustaining, and expressive power of African Americans.

At this juncture it might be good for us to place the meaning of African American religion in the context of the modern *study* of religion. It is a well known observation that the *study* of religion is a "child of the Enlightenment." Two new sources of data fueled this new study and understanding of religion—the primitives and the "religions of the East" (the "Orientals"). The areas of the world peopled by those

falling into these categories were under increasing Western influence and dominance through colonialism, imperialism, and trade. The category “religion” was used to classify the cultural forms and practices of these new territories. The classification of the new forms of data under these categories gave rise to a new meaning of both the nature of the human and also of religion. Given the norm of reason as the hallmark of the Enlightenment, religion in general and the newer forms of data were placed under the sign of “unreason” or the non-rational. While the practice of religion and religious institutions remained as important modes of Western culture, they had, for the most part, lost their efficacious and normative meanings as the basis for the ordering of these societies. Religion from an Enlightenment point of view was distanced from the West in terms of time and space.

As the only nation coming into being out of the ideologies and norms of the Enlightenment, the United States of America presents us with a unique variation regarding the nature and meaning of religion. Whereas almost every other country in the world had some traditions that bound the people together as a unique entity, there was and has never been such a tradition in the United States, in other words, no *ancien regime*. This has meant that the American nation has had to have recourse to other modes of binding, and for most of its history, it has accepted the implicit notion that it is a nation bound together by the unity of the “white race.” To be sure, the notion of a “white race” is vague and highly ambiguous, but it is nonetheless a highly guarded and intensely practiced meaning in the American Republic. This meaning of the religiosity of America is generally discussed under the rubric of “civil religion,” though none of the proponents of an American civil religion have dealt with the issue of race as a part of its meaning.¹³ Will Herberg’s discussion raises the ethnic issue but finesses it within a discourse of religion. It is clear, however, from Herberg’s work that neither African Americans, even though most of them would be classified as Protestant, nor Native Americans play any role in his formulations.

We must add this understanding of the religiosity of America as civil religion to the Christian Protestant traditions that emerged from the Reformation in the traditions of the Calvinists and the Wesleyans. Though these traditions do not define the nature of civil society in the United States, they are appealed to as the sources of moral discourses in the public realm. African Americans have engaged in discourses on both traditions through their appeal to the American Constitution and have equally been a part of the American denominational orders organizing churches in the Protestant traditions of most of the mainline Reformation traditions. *Vis-à-vis* the non-African American majority in the country, neither the Christian churches nor the U.S. Constitution have effected the inclusiveness embodied in their respective understandings of human community. So while these institutions are part and

parcel of the traditions of African Americans, they have been taken in a critical and prophetic manner rather than as descriptive of the ideals that they enunciate.

African Americans in the United States thus fall into an anomalous position. They are a necessary part of the constituting and formative sense of the American culture and nation, and precisely because they are, they are seen as apart, in the sense of apartheid, from how the majority of Americans understand themselves. There has therefore emerged in African American culture a critical history of protest and agitation regarding their legitimacy and rights as American citizens. One might say that this history often expresses the merger of a kind of African American civil religion within the confines of Christianity. James Cone's *Black Theology* is the latest example of the meaning of this amalgam of traditions. There are two fundamental questions concerning African Americans in the United States: the first has to do with whether the American status quo can or ever will acknowledge African Americans and their traditions as a primordial structure of the American reality. The second issue is this: to what extent should those who have endured a history of systematic and legitimized oppression wish to become a part of and continue such a system? This raises the possibility of an alternative.

In addressing the issue of alternatives I wish to turn to the African American intellectual, W.E.B. DuBois, for I perceive in his life and work a more comprehensive vision of African Americans in the United States from a world historical view, without losing the concreteness of their history and experience in the United States. He explored a range of meanings and situations, Africa and pan-Africanism, the nature of U.S. Constitution and law, America and its relationship to Europe and the world, etc. As one of the first trained social scientists in the United States, he carried out social scientific researches on almost every form of the social life of African Americans.

For this transitional move I wish to concentrate on his third book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. His first book, which appeared as the first volume of the Harvard American History Series in 1896, is entitled, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America from 1683-1870*. His second published work was *The Philadelphia Negro*, published in 1899. *Souls* appeared in 1903. Even for an accomplished intellectual and writer the text reveals, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, the mode of a "first naivete." It is a text about beginnings; it is not a text of the disciplines. It refers to those beginnings that define the archaism of the modern period through the tragic beauty of black bodies, the dilemma of the contact of peoples, the pathos and hypocrisy of evil, the aesthetics of tragedy, and the economies of reason and materialities. It is clear that this text centers on the situation of African Americans in the United States since Reconstruction. The references to Booker T. Washington, Alexander Crummel, Fisk University, and so on, make this clear. Yet,

given all this specificity through explicit reference and contextual stylistics, DuBois places this situation into a wider framework. In chapter two of *The Souls*, he states, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the relation of the darker races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and islands of the sea.”¹⁴ Again in the preface to the Jubilee edition titled “Fifty Years After,” he writes,

But today I see more clearly than yesterday that, back of the problem of race and color, lies a greater problem which both obscures and implements it; and that is the fact that so many civilized persons are willing to live in comfort even if the price of this is poverty, ignorance, and disease of the majority of their fellowmen; that to maintain this privilege men have waged war, until today war tends to become universal and continuous, and the excuse for this war continues largely to be color and race.¹⁵

So, on the one hand, while DuBois concentrates on the specific situation of the African American people and presence in the United States, he is able to discern that this people and their presence constitute a much deeper issue than defined by race or the political parameters represented by the U.S. Constitution and its compromising history of evasion in the face of the issue of human freedom.

From another perspective, DuBois’ text should be read alongside the other “mythological texts” of modernity such as those of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. For the most part these philosophical texts also posit some sort of primordial human past, but in abstract terms. DuBois’ text speaks of a real beginning of modernity in the concrete temporal-spatial events of the Atlantic world from the fifteenth century to the present as expressed in the African slave trade and the ensuing conquest and destruction of peoples and cultures.

The Atlantic world that begins with the commencement of the voyages of Christopher Columbus was initially seen in continuity with the worlds of the Mediterranean. While the religious style of this world was at that time expressed through the Latin meaning of the Catholic faith, even this style was being punctuated by the technological feat of the voyages themselves and the new geographical knowledge of lands and peoples. The full expression of the Atlantic world was under the aegis of a Protestant orientation stemming from the Protestant Reformation. The watchword of this reforming tendency was “human freedom.” While the Mediterranean world might be seen as an incubator for the creation of gods and religion—those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Jews, Christians, Manichees, and Zoroastrians—the Atlantic world, even in its religious modes of Protestantism, expresses strictures on the lively exuberance of the religious life.

The Atlantic world introduces us to the globalization of the meaning of humanity. It creates and intensifies the relationships among and

between all the peoples of the planet. The Atlantic is, however, not a revealer of deities, seers, and prophets; it is not under the sign of revelation but of freedom, civilization, and rational orders. This world manifests no regard for the layered thickness of time. It is a world justified by the epistemologies of Kant and Descartes, the English empiricists, and the ethical economies of Adam Smith and Karl Marx. The world of the Atlantic lives under the rhetoric and mark of freedom—a freedom that was supposed to banish the specter of the ancient gods and reveal a new and deeper structure of the meaning of human existence. The Atlantic reveals no “soul-stuff,” no primordial ordering of time and space.¹⁶

Allow me to restate why I introduced DuBois at this point. I am not attempting to create a “religion of DuBois,” nor am I asserting that DuBois’ formulations are the key or answer to the modern religious situation. I am saying that his text is one of the first to explore an alternative ordering of the world that does not yield either to the temptations of binaries and separations or to the false illusions of continuities. DuBois recognizes that in the midst of those continuities that offered a more inclusive meaning of freedom in the modern world, there were fundamental and almost ontological discontinuities that moved towards another resolution. In other words, those who were oppressed in the modern period cannot hope that they will experience liberation in the terms of these continuities of freedom. In the case of the Africans enslaved in the Americas, they must go “back into the water” for a reorientation. They must realize that the slave and the enslavers sailed on the same boat, but they were making radically different journeys and defining radically different destinies. These fundamental differences arise because they are “on the same boat,” and one must come to terms with them in this locus.

While the meaning of the continuity of freedom is expressed in America as the formation of an American “self” from the time of the first English settlements to the present, DuBois raises the issue of the “soul” as a critique, alternative, and new creative possibility for this new time and new space. And he discerns that this new ordering must perforce come to terms with the legacies of that voyage across the Atlantic—the meaning of Africa and the meaning of the Americas. DuBois’ use of the veil in *Souls* is indicative of a subtle meaning that he is setting forth; in a fundamental sense, the veil is the caul which often covers a child at birth. In the legacy of African Americans, this is a portentous sign of something amazing or even wise. In other places the veil describes the falseness of separation between the two races, and at other times it highlights the permeable osmotic nature of this separateness. It is the travail of black folk that they must of necessity live through this situation and through the various meanings of the veil come to terms with the embryonic birth of the “soul.”

Now while the American political and national culture is permeated with the rhetoric of freedom—which befits a country founded on a revolution—enslaved Africans did not experience this openness of American freedom. So while African Americans have often made common cause in these rhetorical expressions, it is clear that another meaning of freedom is being enunciated in the traditions of those who have been enslaved. David Brion Davis puts it this way in his discussion of Hegel's understanding of freedom and bondage:

It was Hegel's genius to endow lordship and bondage with such a rich resonance of meanings that the model could be applied to every form of physical and psychological domination. And the argument precluded the simple and sentimental solution that all bondsmen should become masters, and all masters, the bondsmen. Above all, Hegel bequeathed a message that would have a profound impact on future thought, especially as Marx and Freud deepened the meaning of the message: that we can expect nothing from the mercy of God or from the mercy of those who exercise worldly lordship in His or other names; that man's true emancipation, whether physical or spiritual, must always depend on those who have endured and overcome some form of slavery.¹⁷

Davis' statement is congruent in content and tone with the way in which I see a profound religious dimension in the work of DuBois—with one exception. Those who have in the modern period overcome some form of slavery were opened to another and deeper experience of modernity than those who through the illusions of continuities of freedom debased others. From the intensity of the experiences themselves, or through remembrances and recollections, they experienced other forms of power beyond those of human agency, and therefore they are convinced that neither the gods nor the godlessness of the world of the oppressors can be efficacious in the name of freedom. The gods and the godlessness of the oppressive traditions must be reinterpreted from other perspectives, and such reinterpretations should bring about a new hermeneutical and epistemological situation.

RELIGION, MATERIALITIES, AND CULTURES OF CONTACT

Two basic paradigms lie behind the construction of the modern Western self. On the one hand is a conception of the self based upon Descartes' famous, "*cogito ergo sum.*" On the other hand is Max Weber's explanation of the relationship of Protestantism to capital accumulation. In the Cartesian formula there are two forms of the self as "I"—the "I" of the "*cogito*" that in a miraculous "sha-zam" manner becomes the "I" of the "*sum.*" One of the most recent interpretations of the Cartesian

formula is that of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur sees the first ego of the *cogito* as an expression of the self in a moment of reflection; it is the “I think” which is the positing of the self as not dependent upon any other object in its modality of a thinking subject. This is a self that cannot express, show, embody, or admit the matter upon which it depends; it is empty and abstract. For the self to be shown, it must reappropriate other objects and substances so that it can become an existential being in a life-world.¹⁸

The second paradigm is that set forth by Max Weber regarding the beginnings of capitalism. Weber attributes the rise of capitalism to a form of Reformed theology prevalent in new communities in the Atlantic world. In Weber’s view, Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, allied with Luther’s doctrine of “calling,” led these Calvinist communities to practice a form of what he has called “inner worldly asceticism.” Luther’s notion of calling gave dignity to all vocations, thus bestowing prestige to all ordinary work. While acknowledging the dignity of ordinary work, Calvin’s doctrine of predestination made it clear that no works, whether ordinary or extraordinary, counted towards one’s salvation. Thus one is told to work with diligence, but at the same time one can not expect one’s works, however noble, to play any part in one’s ultimate salvation. This led to the accumulation of surplus resources, the basis for capital investment.¹⁹

Both of these paradigms locate a meaning of the “self” as a form of inwardness that must then negotiate with a world that is “out there.” This “world out there” is necessary for the manifestation and showing of the self, but it does not partake of its inner constitution. This is one of the primary meanings of selfhood that has been evoked within the interstices of the creation of the Atlantic world economy of mercantilism and capitalism. What is clear here is that, however the self may be constituted, it is dependent on things, forms, modes, matter—stuff—that it does not create. In the case of the Atlantic world, one of those forms upon which a European American self depended was the bodies of Africans transported as chattel slaves into the New World as the basis for the accumulation of wealth and resources for the mercantile and capitalistic form of production. One can imagine the meaning of “freedom” for this form of a self in light of any notion of god or limits to the autonomous inwardness, privacy, and purity that was the essence of its mode of being.

I referred above to the fact that on the slave ships were Europeans and Africans, two human groups on the same ships but making different voyages. And these different voyages had to do with the very constitution of a meaning of the human within this time/space of the voyage as a passage into another form of human meaning. For the most part, the European enslavers define these voyages in the language of discoveries, new opportunities, ventures. In other words, while a difference is

defined between the world of Europe and the Americas, such novelty is muted by the practical and ideological meanings of continuity. There are no fundamental experiences of discontinuity. Indeed, they have characterized this time period in continuity with their own past as “the modern age,” or modernity.

I am raising the issue of religion again in light of a new beginning—a beginning that also defines the hiatus between the old and the new as experienced within the holds of the slave ships in passage. Those enslaved within the hold were literally “entangled subjects/objects.”²⁰ Those many slave-ships and their cargoes in the Atlantic Ocean mark a profound *site of memory* for the modern world. It is from this site that another perspective on the worlds of the Americas, Europe, and Africa may be gained. The entangled subjects/objects—the slavers, the enslaved, the formations of personhoods, theories of exchange, and ideologies of freedom and religion—are all intertwined within this entanglement. The world of modernity has only interpreted this site from the point of view of the enslavers, those who were in charge of the slave ships; this is the case whether the discourses were pro- or anti-slavery. DuBois’ double consciousness as portrayed in *Souls* carries with it the vestiges of this site as a space of terror within the heart of the modern world of democratic values and ideologies of freedom. Making use of a religious metaphor in referring to the slave trade, he says, “they descended into Hell.”²¹

What was being articulated as the nature and meaning of modernity was a world dominated by the West that overlooked, avoided, obscured, lied about, and denied the dependence of modernity on the *entanglement*, the fact that from those dreaded voyages out of which the world of modernity was a-borning, other and new realities were simultaneously taking place. African American religion must be placed within this wider context and while the specificity of the situation in the United States will always be the starting point for any interpretation, the larger reality is one inclusive of the religions and cultures of other enslaved and oppressed in the Americas but also as DuBois put it in *Souls*, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.” That color-line is global, for the paradigm of the Atlantic world was extended and adapted to all parts of the world.

The conventional Western periodization of temporality as Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, Modern, and here of late, as post-modern, is the designation of the history of the world as a prelude to the “rise of the West.” The modern period is the only period in which most of the prominent participants had little or no say in the creation of the world that they had to inhabit and were known through the categories placed upon them by the various “sciences” of the West. While it makes rhetorical and practical sense to speak of this period as “modern,” it is in fact the global period of cultural contact throughout the world. Instead of

speaking of the “postmodern” world as simply an internal critique of the “world that the West made” by and through the Western tradition and its categories, the contemporary period might better be called the “time of cultural contact.” This designation would allow for a full critical discussion regarding all parties to the cultures that came into being over the last five hundred years. In other words, voices of the experience of cultural formations, values, and meanings can no longer be dominated by the discourses of the Western sciences. This does not mean an outright rejection of the West or its discourses, but it does mean that all discourses out of those cultures formed in various parts of the world over the last half-century, including Western culture itself, must be placed within the same arena, thus rejecting the Western temporal ordering of the world. This would bring about a very different discussion of all those meanings, images, and symbols related to what we call religion. African American religion as well as the religious life in all parts of the world would then assume another status and quality. Those cultures on one side of what DuBois defined as the “color-line” have, during the period of cultural contact, come to their own critical and creative meanings of religion and the religious life, and thus have come to very different assessments of their status and value. It is from this perspective that I read DuBois’ *Souls* as a religious text stemming from the global cultures of contact. These religious meanings are not throwbacks to a former age, nor are they expressions of ignorance; they are often alternate perspectives on the nature of the human species and their world.

The language of *Souls* employs what Ann Kibbey has called “material shapes of language.”²² Kibbey’s work shows how the rhetorical use of the material shapes of language were used polemically to incite the Puritans to violence against the Pequots as well as against Puritan dissenters such as Anne Hutchison. Material shapes in language refer to the rhetorical usage of the figurative and nonfigurative in discourse. Thus a discourse shows a correlation between the linguistic form, the material fact of speech, and the relationship between the positioning of words and the acoustical sounds as necessary for the production of a distinct meaning.

In DuBois’ usage, the material shapes of language create a position beyond the binariness of race and racial discourses in American cultural languages. Such a language does not, however, move to an abstract universalism; it remains very concrete and employs this very concreteness to probe and move beyond dualism. The language is critical but not polemical; it repositions the issues such that they move beyond both the polemical egotistical explanatory scientific modes to a fresh and novel beginning point. And it is precisely through the specific concreteness of his language that the material shapes appear.

Now through the material shapes of language, DuBois nuances and echoes the materialities of the Atlantic world—the world of slavery, slave ships and enslavers, as well as the world of democratic values and

freedom. He will not, however, allow the bright promises of freedom to obliterate the horrendous terror that underlay the creation of the Atlantic world. It has been this world that has been denied and unspoken and unacknowledged. Any meaning of freedom or self or religion that does not take serious account of the events of formation of the Atlantic world will remain illusory. My continuing research in this area entails the exploration of an alternative epistemology that would re-situate the meaning of modern "economy" and economic theory through a reflection upon the simultaneity of humans as chattel (matter) and bearers of souls. This aspect of the meaning of economic theory has been overlooked by all modern economic theorists. It is directly related to the religious meaning of fetish and fetishism (purported to have been derived from Africa as the earliest form of religion) and to the carry-over of this meaning into the form and meaning of matter as commodity.

ENDNOTES

¹ This article should be seen in continuity with earlier studies I have devoted to this topic. In "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," I began an outline of some of the basic elements that had to be treated in any study of this religious orientation. In the William James Lecture at Harvard, "The Oppressive Element in Religion and the Religions of the Oppressed," I delineated the difference between religious dependence and limit, and historical oppression and domination. I showed how any notion of civil religion in the United States must of necessity deal with the meaning of enslaved Africans and the institution of slavery in America to have any validity, in an article entitled "Civil Rights/Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion." All of these articles are reprinted in *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 2d ed. (Aurora CO: The Davies Group, 1999). See also my bibliographical essay, "African American Religion in the United States," in *The African American Experience*, ed. Arvah E. Strickland and Robert E. Weems (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).

² C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *The Black Church Experience in Religion*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1977), 3.

³ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in African-American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), see chapter 1, *passim*.

⁴ Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau, *African American Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

⁵ See Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁶ See the following: Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: "The Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Mechal Sobel,

Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979); Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁷ Eugene Genovese's work, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974) is a bit disingenuous, since prior to this work he published another volume, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971). Taken together these two works set up a binary that is not carried through in the later work. One can only support such a binary by giving legitimacy to the enforced silence of the oppressed.

⁸ See Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1973). The term "maroon" refers to fugitive slaves who existed in a self-contained communities, often in the mountains or other hard-to-reach locations. Maroon communities successfully fought off slavers and maintained their independence.

⁹ Teresa Longo, ed., *Pablo Neruda and the U.S. Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2002) , xxiii and 124-25.

¹⁰ John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1977).

¹¹ See John Lovell Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1972); Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1963); and Douglas Henry Daniels, *Lester Leaps In: The Life and Times of Lester 'Pres' Young* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002). For an overall history of black music see Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).

¹² Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel Prosser's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1802 & 1803* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

¹³ For discussions of civil religion, see Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* Vol. 96, No. 1, (Winter, 1967), 1-21; Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1960). See also Catherine Albanese's discussion of civil religion in *America, Religion and Religions*, 3d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1999).

¹⁴ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, The Jubilee Edition (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1973), 13.

¹⁵ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, xi.

¹⁶ See Charles H. Long's, "Passage and Prayer," in *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption*, ed. Quinton Hosford Dixie and Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 15-16.

¹⁷ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 564.

¹⁸ See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

¹⁹ See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1958). Debate and controversy have surrounded Weber's bold thesis since its publication. The scope of this article does not allow for discussion of this aspect of his work. Two of the most trenchant critiques are found in Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, vol. I, trans.

by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), and Benjamin Nelson, *The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).

²⁰ The phrase is taken from the title of Nicholas Thomas' book, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

²¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 727.

²² Ann Kibbey, *The Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism: A Study of Rhetoric, Prejudice, and Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).