

Preface

So much of what takes place within the United States and within the global context is linked to religion. Both positive developments and traumatic damage in our world often depend on sensibilities and thought connected to religiosity.

In response, scholars and the general public have wrestled with the nature and meaning of religion—why it seems to matter so much to so many and how it can be responsible for, or at least linked to, activities of both devastation and development. Even aggressive critiques of religion by the “New Atheists”—figures such as Richard Dawkins—serve to highlight the tenacity of things religious. And while the New Atheists focus on religion in general terms, highlighting some rather glaring examples of religion’s problematic presence in public life, others argue for the inherent value of religion as a moral and ethical compass for individual and collective activity.

In the United States perhaps no community has been more closely associated with religion as a tool for self-definition and activity than African Americans. Be it the development of early churches, various Islamic communities, African-based traditions, religious humanism,

or other configurations, the grammar of religion and religious commitment seem to be defining elements of the way African Americans articulate their lives and life experiences. Whether one speaks of figures such as Maria Stewart, Henry McNeal Turner, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Barbara Jordan, or a host of others, the public presentation of democratic life is often maintained by means of a religious posture toward the world. In short, religion matters.

This assumed geography of African American religiosity has sparked and shaped numerous articles and books, public lectures, radio as well as television interviews, and university lectures—all articulating various aspects of this connection between African Americans and religion. And all these writings and conversations have resulted in greater clarity concerning the historical development and use of religion and religious experience within African American communities. However, this corpus of work leaves unanswered central questions: What does it mean to be African American and religious in the United States? What is the nature of African American religion? Are there links between the various and competing religious traditions found in African American communities? How does one speak about and investigate what appears to be multiple manifestations of African American religion? What is *the religion* in African American religion?

Several years ago I was offered an opportunity to wrestle with these difficult questions within the context of eight lectures given as the Edward Cadbury Lecturer at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. The content of those lectures was presented to a larger audience through *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (2003). While composed of numerous chapters and although intentionally detailed and layered, *Terror and Triumph* is concerned primarily with five major points: (1) Understandings of African American religion guided by preoccupation with doctrine, institutions, and formal practices do not uncover religion's underlying nature and meaning; (2) African American religion at its core is a quest for complex subjectivity; (3) African American religion understood this way (as outlined in [2]) is religion because of its focus on deep meaning that encompasses the whole of existential and ontological concern and need; (4) Studying African American religion theorized as above requires a rethinking of methodology and source materials; and (5) Claims made within the study of African American religion must be modest because they are mindful of the inability to fully capture the elemental impulse that is religion.

These five points are those I most wanted to emphasize in that book, and I present them here in a more focused and concise manner.¹ My aim with this volume is both grand and modest.

Through these pages it is my hope readers will come to discover that African American religion in fundamental terms feels much more familiar than anticipated and seems much closer (and actually more mundane) than we want to believe. Perhaps it is at this point we recognize the making of meaning when it is most meaningful and humanity when it is at its best . . . and worse.

Acknowledgements

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