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978-0-521-19853-0 - African American Religions, 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom

Sylvester A. Johnson

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book is a study of Black religion and its intersection with empire. It starts where Albert J. Raboteau began his classic, watershed study of African American slave religions – with the rise of Afro-European commercialism in West Africa in 1441. When Raboteau composed his history of Black religions in the 1970s, the terms “Black Atlantic” and “Atlantic world” were not in currency. Yet, the history of scholarship has vindicated Raboteau’s periodization and the geographical purview of his narrative frame. He realized that the study of African American religions could not be contained by the time and space of the United States of America. As Charles H. Long has demonstrated in his scholarship, moreover, what is conveniently termed “African American religion” is always already constitutive of a diasporic formation of peoples within and beyond Africa whose subjectivity is rooted in racial Blackness. Long has repeatedly emphasized that the study of African American religion must be conceived through engaging with the Atlantic world instead of being constrained and controlled by the idea of the United States. The specific historical formations that have constituted African American religion have been derived through transnational networks and global linkages of trade, politics, and religious exchanges. The same holds true for White American religion. Scholars of White American religion have usually begun their narratives across the Atlantic – typically starting with Europe during the 1400s. Although their focus has usually veiled the significance of Africa, they have nevertheless found it necessary to tell their story as an Atlantic account – Sidney Ahlstrom’s “European prologue” is a case in point.¹

¹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs,*

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To speak of the Atlantic world is to speak of Atlantic empires, although not in a reductive sense. Given the long history of studying African American religions through their relationship to slavery, it is now time for a study of Black religion that explains the deep ties to the architecture of empire – by which I mean the political order of governing through the colonial relation of power. I examine Black religion and colonialism in multiple Atlantic geographies, including the Kongo Kingdom, Liberia, and the United States. The phenomenon of US colonialism, however, is the most pivotal for this book. This study conceptualizes colonialism as the political order that dominating polities administer over subjugated peoples. Colonialism encompasses military, economic, political, and psychological modes of subordinating a population. This form of political order structures occupation or foreign control of one people by another. Most concisely, colonialism is the constitutive work of imperial polities. It is what makes empire socially real and efficacious. Most importantly for this study, colonialism is the essential matrix of racialization. It is what makes race. Not every instance of colonialism results in racialization. But the colonial form of power is essential to racial formation. This means race is politics or, more precisely, biopolitics. If there was any silver lining to Michel Foucault's refusal to engage with Europe's external colonies, it was his lack of interest in phenotype when attempting to account for the emergence of the racial state. He rightly perceived that racism was a state practice achieved through "internal colonialism" by producing exclusive forms of political community.²

Colonialism, furthermore, is formed not through a spatial differential but rather through a *power* differential. It is constituted by politics, not physical distance. This means we must dispense with the "saltwater fallacy" that claims colonialism happens only overseas or in distant lands. This book engages with both internal and external modes of colonialism. With more than 300 reservations currently within the geopolitical boundaries of the contiguous United States,

Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 1999). Charles H. Long, "What Is Africa to Me?: Reflection, Discernment, and Anticipation," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (January 2013): 91–108. Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972).

² See Alyosha Goldstein's introduction to his edited *Formations of United States Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 8–9. Alejandro Colás, *Empire* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007). Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 103. Bernard Porter, *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America and the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

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one might expect that Western scholars would have produced far more engagement with internal colonialism. Instead, outside of indigenous studies or ethnic studies scholarship, studies of empire that account for indigeneity remain the exception rather than the rule. And yet, internal colonialism is one of the key theoretical frameworks that has been richly informed by colonized people themselves. The scholarship on internal colonialism and, more recently, internal neo-colonialism has particularly demonstrated the importance of attending to “the colonized” as human populations and not merely “territory” or “regions” under “foreign” control.³

Internal colonialism is especially important for interpreting the history of African American religions. One of the unique factors of African American religion is the difficulty of discerning and appreciating the colonial status of African American religious actors. Frankly, African Americans have been studied as victims of slavery and not as people who have been colonized. The reasons for this are profoundly historical as well as ideological. To examine the colonial status of African Americans requires one to call into question the fundamental paradigm of the United States as a noble, democratic, freedom-loving society. This conflicts with the liberal integrationist paradigm through which African Americans are viewed as always having been members of the United States. More precisely, this analysis requires an intellectual study of the West that makes visible the ties that bind freedom and democracy to colonialism. As this book demonstrates, the political experiment of the United States in democratic freedom (this includes the African American quest for freedom) has been anchored in and enabled by colonialism. This is a deeply complicated subject, but its explication lies at the heart of this book. African American religions have functioned in most scholarly studies and in the US political imaginary as a symbol of the American promise, as a type of sentimental proof that the West – especially the United States – most fully embodies what

³ Robert L. Allen, “Reassessing the Internal (Neo) Colonialism Theory,” *The Black Scholar* 35 (Spring 2005): 2–11. Roderick Bush, “The Internal Colony Hybrid: Reformulating, Structure, Culture, and Agency,” in *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations*, ed. Keri E. Iyall Smith and Patricia Leavy (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009). Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York: Orion Press, 1965). Charles Pinderhughes, “21st Century Chains: The Continuing Relevance of Internal Colonialism Theory,” PhD diss., Boston College, 2009. Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011).

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Francis Fukuyama has so poignantly called the “end of history,” the most sublime form of political order.⁴ As I have studied the intersection of Black religion and empire, however, I have become convinced that no thoughtful human being can understand the linkages of colonialism, democracy, and freedom I have sought to make visible in this account and still perceive African American religions in harmony with the triumphalist strains of the American myth. It is because of *colonialism* (even more so than slavery per se) that African American religions have so frequently and continually taken form under the sign of freedom. As Orlando Patterson has argued so compellingly, the *myth of freedom* that swells the hearts of billions with pride and loyalty must give way under the lens of intellectual study to the reality of the *institution of freedom* (I mean this in the way that scholars understand slavery to be an institution). These are the terms at stake in this study of Black religion.⁵

There can be little legitimate debate over whether the United States of America is the world’s greatest emblem of democratic freedom. The fact that the United States enjoys this singular status has long been recognized. The United States, after all, emerged as the world’s first constitutional democracy. France might be credited with elevating freedom as the supreme political value, and republican democracy as the highest political order during the eighteenth century. It was the United States, however, that first actualized the vision of republican democracy. The French author Alexis de Tocqueville devoted several years to composing his two-volume *Democracy in America* precisely because he grasped the vast implications of the United States as an unparalleled political experiment in republican, democratic freedom.

The United States is also a powerful empire. Unlike its status as the greatest emblem of freedom, however, the imperial status of the United States has cycled through widespread acknowledgment and denial for most of its history as a sovereign state. Particularly since the US military response to 9/11, literally hundreds of monographs and thousands of articles have examined its formation as an empire of global proportions. At the same time, the arguments against assigning this imperial status to the United States have also been vigorous in recent years. With few exceptions, moreover, studies of the United States as an empire have typically been unconcerned with religion. And the scholarship examining

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁵ Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

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American religion have in turn only occasionally devoted significant attention to empire.⁶

Even a cursory examination of Atlantic colonialism, however, quickly reveals that religion has been a central element of colonial formations. The political authorization for establishing Western colonial rule in the Mediterranean lands, throughout Africa, and in the Americas resided with papal power. Christendom itself was an imperial formation that mirrored and opposed massive Islamicate polities such as the Ottoman Empire. The Reconquista, moreover, which defined the fundamental context for the so-called age of discovery, was largely conceived and executed as the defense of Christian imperium against Muslims. Scholars of religion are of course familiar with the role of Christianity as a *political* entity in the viceroyalty of New Spain and in the British colonies of North America. The role of missionary religion, furthermore, is inseparable from the efforts to expand secular Western rule over indigenous polities throughout North America and in Asia and Africa. Finally, although the so-called secularization thesis of twentieth-century scholarship seemed to promise that religion had ceased to be relevant to Western politics, that claim now rings patently hollow given the ascent of the Religious Right and the focus of the US security state on Islamism.

Atlantic slavery was at the center of the Atlantic empires through which emerged White settler states, finance capitalism, and liberal democracies. The vaunted ideals of freedom and democracy that resonated throughout the Atlantic world were espoused and institutionalized by Europeans devoted to racism, slavery, and imperial conquest. The relationship between freedom and its others has to be *explained* instead of being dismissed as mere hypocrisy or contradiction. This singular imperative guides the entire study before the reader. And it is why I argue, for instance, that settler colonialism became a strategy of utmost significance for African Americans who sought to forge freedom from racial rule and enslavement under a White racial state. This is certainly counterintuitive and disturbing, but it is only one of several connections to which we should resist blinding ourselves. As the narrative of this book unfolds, the relationship among colonialism, democracy, and freedom emerges with irony, intrigue, and perhaps even terror.

The book accounts for the linkage of colonialism, democracy, and freedom by proffering a particular *story* of African American religions.

⁶ Paul Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* 116 (December 2011): 1348–91.

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There are many stories that deserve to be told in the process of interpreting the history of religion and its intersection with political orders. This is one of them. The entire book is driven by narrative. To a considerable degree, this narrative structure works to explain concepts and produce analytical claims. There are real limits, however, to the ability of narrative to explicate theoretical problems. For this reason, the narrative material is synthesized throughout with more explicitly theoretical discussion of major concepts and themes. I have aimed to do this in a way that provides serious engagement with the actual nature of colonialism, democracy, and freedom. I have sought to avoid merely bandying about these terms and have aspired instead to *account* for them as socially real and historically derived concepts and institutions. This structure – synthesizing narrative with theory – presents a special challenge. The narrative accretions are essential to the larger analytical demonstrations of the book, which means that some arguments (e.g., that race is politics, not phenotypic meanings) simply take time to demonstrate and do not elapse over the course of a few pages. The entire book composes an extended argument, and each section works to demonstrate conclusions that I personally have found deeply disturbing and even difficult to accept (which is not the same as “difficult to believe”).

Throughout this book, I explain the connections among freedom, democracy, and colonialism by interpreting the data about Black religion at points of intersection with empire (i.e., the political order of colonial governance). Put differently, this is not a general survey of African American religions. Rather, it is a study of how Black religion (and Atlantic religion, more broadly) has been caught up with empire, where the latter is both problematic and generative. I make no pretensions of telling the “whole story” of Black religion or providing a “full account” of the subject. It has always been my impression that such is an impossible, fictive quest. Instead, this book selectively spans several centuries and engages with multiple geographies (particularly West and West Central Africa and North America) to demonstrate how African American religions have been deeply enmeshed within the interstices of colonialism (particularly that of the United States) and that this colonialism (again, especially that of an American empire) is the matrix for the venerable freedom and democracy to which both colonizers and the colonized alike are intensively devoted.

This book unfolds over three major parts. Part 1 comprises three chapters and spans the creation of networks of religion and empire in West Central Africa during the 1400s to the formations of race, religion,

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and colonial governance in North America as late as the 1700s, before the formal creation of the United States as a racial state. I locate the foundation of Atlantic networks of power and social institutions in the commercial relations that African states established with European polities (beginning with Portuguese merchants of Lisbon). For this reason, commercialism and corporatism feature prominently throughout Part 1. Chapter 1 examines this commercialism as a central context for religious exchange in the Kongo Empire and in the city-states of Elmina and Cape Coast. Chapter 2 elucidates the central role of materiality (the philosophy of matter – understanding the nature of things as things) in formations of Atlantic religion and in the intellectual paradigms that shaped the study of religion as a colonial enterprise. Chapter 3 focuses on the role of early corporations in forming democratic freedom as a settler-colonial form of Christian governance. I examine Black religious subjectivity through its connection to empire by interpreting racial slavery as a critical element of colonialism. I also argue that religion among enslaved Africans was a quest for specific liberties (in the case of New Spain's Blacks) and an effort to become visible to religious ideas about time and history (in the case of Blacks under British colonialism). The Christian experience of Africans in New Spain, particularly, demonstrates the exceeding complexity of Christian domination because the Christian Inquisition there enabled enslaved Blacks to disrupt slavery's totalizing demands.

In Part 2, I examine Black settler colonialism as a central paradigm of political theology and self-determination among African-descended peoples in the United States. Chapter 4, the first of two chapters in Part 2, begins by interpreting how free Blacks experienced the United States as a White Christian settler state. I explain why the American Revolutionary War, as a White settler rebellion, induced lasting consequences that both crystallized the racial rule of Whites over free and enslaved Africans and intensified the imperative for Black settler colonies. I then explain the creation of Liberia as a Black Christian settler state. I demonstrate that Liberia emerged through a richly ironic conflagration of competing interests (particularly those of Whites seeking to preserve White-only citizenship in the United States and free Africans devoted to self-determination). More importantly, I argue that democratic freedom became a reality for African American settlers because, as with the US settler state, Americo-Liberian democracy was a colonial project of racial governance, and Christianity was absolutely central to that enterprise. Chapter 5 examines Black political theology from the 1850s to the 1890s to demonstrate how African American religion continued to be shaped by the

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imperatives of Black self-governance and, increasingly, the imperial ambitions of US militarism in the decades following the Civil War. In this fifth chapter, I argue that the failure of Reconstruction, as an effort to create a multiracial democracy, underscored for African Americans the specific nature of the United States as a White racial state. I also argue that US militarism became a pivotal factor that created Black loyalty to the political aims of a White republic. On a larger scale, Part 2 demonstrates how Black religion was distinctly and overwhelmingly shaped by the problem of colonialism.

Part 3 of the book devotes central attention to the interface between Black anticolonial religious movements and US counterintelligence. I demonstrate how the national security paradigm (repressing internal enemies of the state) functioned as a central element of United States empire during the twentieth century, both responding to and shaping the history of Black anticolonial religion. Chapter 6 opens this final section by attending to the diasporic themes and theological force of the Garvey movement as realized through the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)'s global activism and institutional presence. Among the lasting consequences of this movement was the creation of Black ethnic religions. Because of their political theology, Black ethnic religions such as the Moorish Science Temple of America and the Nation of Islam were targeted for pervasive, perduring repression by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In Chapter 7, I explain how the FBI's counterintelligence measures produced lasting changes in the architecture of state racism by wedding practices of national security to a philosophy of military engagement with domestic enemies. To this end, the United States formally associated its exercise of external colonialism to internal colonialism as federal agents repressed Black liberation activism, which they perceived as one of myriad global efforts countering Western colonialism. Throughout the Cold War years, moreover, Christian nationalism became an increasingly influential element of US politics, specifically as officials and laypersons of the United States articulated that their nation was a Western, "Christian America" in a fundamental, civilizational struggle against "godless" communism. I argue that the US empire managed and rendered this clash of civilizations as a racial conflict that, by the century's end, was easily legible as a struggle of a Western, Christian society against religious, civilizational others. By the last decade of the twentieth century, in fact, African American religions comprised conflicting elements such as an expansive Christian nationalism, a strident rejoinder to the cultural imperialism of the United States among African-derived

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religions (such as Oyotunji African Village), and a keen critique of the US racial state (as reflected in the Nation of Islam).

In the concluding chapter, I explain the ways that colonialism, democracy, and freedom have been mutually constituting and deeply interwoven in a continuing pattern of racial governance. I point to the current racialization of Islam and explain how it has been so deeply shaped by the longer history of the FBI repressing African American Muslims.

I undertake this study of religion as a worthwhile enterprise in its own right *and* as an opportunity to examine a set of larger questions about the nature of freedom, not as some mythological concept imagined as virtuous and celestial in origin but as a worldly, social institution of profoundly anthropological provenance. Scholars who have no specific interest in African American religions and who instead are chiefly concerned with other religious actors in the Americas and throughout the Atlantic world should find the book to be of great relevance. This is because it is very much a study of Atlantic empires and the West. By extension, it is my hope that scholars who have no professional interest in studying religion per se but whose research concerns democracy, race, government, or political theory will find much to engage (and argue) with in this book.

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