Black Faith and the (Im)Possibility of Christian Theology in Raboteau's *Slave Religion*: A Question

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The movement from vaudou *to hoodoo [is paradigmatic] of the larger history of African religion in the United States…[The] African theological background has disappeared…folk custom remains.*

—Albert J. Raboteau[1]

If one is to have a theology, it must arise from religion, something prior to theology. [The] religious consciousness of…blacks…is the repository of who they are…

—Charles H. Long[2]

Introduction:

Since its publication in 1978 Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* has been justly hailed as an epochal production in the field of Afro-American religious studies and historical inquiry. One reviewer acclaimed it "necessary reading. It surpasses," he says, "pioneering work by W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, and E. Franklin Frazier to be the most significant study of slave religion yet."[3] It is beyond my intention to unpack the multiple layers of Raboteau's celebrated and virtually canonical text on the questions it addresses. I simply want to raise the question of the theological use made of history and the directions for theological research suggested by the historical narrative he weaves. More specifically, I am interested in uncovering how this text in crucial respects opened certain avenues for the theological investigation of Afro-Christianity while barring others. To be sure, certain academic, cultural, and political exigencies shaped the production of *Slave Religion*. Such a claim is neither problematic nor should it surprise, for all research on some level is interested,

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1 Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 80-81.

2 Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, ed. David Carrasco et al., Rev. ed., Series in Philosophical and Cultural Studies in Religion (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1995), 207.

3 Thomas J. Davis in a review for the *Library Journal*. Oxford Press records the blurb on the back of the paperback edition of [Raboteau, 1978 #139].

not disinterested. Raboteau is forthright about this. He notes that one of the central ambitions of *Slave Religion* is to remedy the neglect of slave sources by historians.[4] This neglect has less to do with the available of resources for pursuing such an endeavor. Rather, (and this Raboteau does not say; but was it really necessary to say?) the racist assumption that African peoples have no history, or at least any history of value,[5] determined the disregard more than anything else. Raboteau's turn to slave sources for building a historical account of slave religion is in keeping with a number of historical productions emerging in the 1970s.[6] Each of these historical works in their own way sought to remedy the neglect of slave sources and to show how black folks were active and not merely passive in becoming New World Afro-American people. A perennial task, more specifically, was to display an intact African self adapting to New World conditions. Religion proved central to and paradigmatic of how African agency remained adaptively intact.

It is precisely here, however, that one ought to raise more questions. For, does not this account of black religion actually foreclose the emergence of the radically new and forestall the appearing of the theologically novel in the unfolding of New World black existence? This is a question not just for *Slave Religion.* For another important and influential production is Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, which draws heavily on religion for its claims about art history and philosophy.[7] *Flash of the Spirit* causes one pause for similar reasons. Both texts seem to offer visions of a fundamentally unimpeded African that, in the end, when read theologically, precludes genuine dialogical encounter with the other who is the Word of Christian existence. These accounts of black being

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4 Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, x.

5 One thinks of the philosophico-historiographic claims of G.W.F Hegel as an example. Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History,* with a foreword by Charles Hegel and J. Sibree, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956).

6 Three historical works immediately come to mind. Winthrop D. Jordon, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1977), which was originally published in 1968 but was republished in 1977, one year before the publication of *Slave Religion* in 1978. Also, one thinks of Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1976), John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), and John W. Blassingame, ed. *Slave Testimony* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

7 Robert Farris. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983)

contain black Christian faith within the metaphysics of a continuous racial self, a self that turns out to be the product of modern colonialism and race theory. In the register of history, they posit the continuity of the African identity, but in such a way as, unwittingly, to (re-)inscribe the racial self created by modern metaphysics and transcendental philosophy. This is done by giving an unbroken history of the racial self, but now inversely inflected as "African." What remains colonized is a vision of Christianity as an identity forming discourse that disrupts the modern metaphysical and racially stabilized self.

The quotation given at the beginning of this chapter warrants repeating because it bears out this claim. Raboteau says, "The movement from *vaudou* to hoodoo [is paradigmatic] of the larger history of African religion in the United States…[The] African theological background has disappeared…folk custom remains."[8] To this there is an important corollary: the slaves and, by extension, their progeny were executing "a deeper level of reinterpretation" of their own African heritage in appropriating of the religion of the master. The diverse and remaining folk customs or 'Africanisms' as they are sometimes called (i.e., ring shouting, inhuming practices and the like) transmit folk belief. Through folk belief, the African theological cosmos "as the essence of religion"[9] remains, but in the background. Raboteau does not state explicitly the difference between the residual religious essence in black folk customs on the one hand and the African theological background that has ostensibly disappeared on the other. Nor does he propose a method— philosophical, theological, or hermeneutical—of correlation between them. But one is justified in asking given the history he tells whether, in the end, is a closed history, a history that seals in the horizon of being and the possibilities of black, indeed, human becoming. *Slave Religion* and *Flash of the Spirit* seem to suggest a scenario, and in so doing they suggest the direction of theological research concerned with the religious practices of New World African peoples and the fundamental problems with which it must wrestle. That theological direction is essentially this: "the variety of African American religious experience"[10] (whether Christian [Protestant or Catholic], Islamic, the varied Caribbean and South American Afro-religious cults,

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[8] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 80-81.

[9] Ibid., 73-74.

[10] Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998)

or the non-theistic religiosity of Afro-humanism) admits of a more fundamental phenomenological reduction to the African itself.[11] Theology must proceed from this reduction, for this makes available, supposedly historically, who African peoples really are. However, as I will show, primarily with respect to *Slave Religion* and more tangentially with respect to *Flash of the Spirit*, the story really being told is of a continuous, untrammeled and, ultimately, colonized and colonizing racial subject.

History and the Ethnographic Gaze

Slave Religion lays the groundwork "for a major history of Afro-American religion." Such a history requires not only an account of "the visible institutions of black religion: the independent black denominations and churches." It also requires a discussion of "the invisible institution…[of] black religion under slavery."[12] Through a twofold structure conceived along these lines Raboteau proposes ferreting the continuities and discontinuities making up the structure of black religion. The ultimate goal is to uncover the singular intuitions and sensibilities of black religious consciousness that perdure both in its invisible antebellum and visible post-bellum manifestations. *Slave Religion*, however, as Raboteau announces early on, is itself not this major history of Afro-American religion. Rather, it is a historical propaedeutic of sorts, the vestibule to a grander project of black religious history. Hence, according to its stated subtitle, *Slave Religion* concerns itself centrally with "The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South." But it would be wrong to suppose that this is the extent of its concern in this text. Were that the case part II, "The Invisible Institution," would contain the totality of the history Raboteau seeks to tell in keeping with the subtitle of the work as a whole. On the contrary, the invisible institution historically unfolds in a most complex way. Accounting for this rather complex unfolding explains the need for a consideration of "The African Heritage" taken up in part I of *Slave Religion*. It is from an understanding of the African heritage that one can situate the broader history of the religions of diasporic African peoples. The significance of the African heritage, however, extends beyond this for Raboteau. The African heritage also identifies an

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[11] Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, ed. Harry S. Stout, Religion in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) presents just such a phenomenological approach to black religion in American.

[12] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, ix.

African consciousness—a certain mode of perception, indeed, a peculiar supra-historical impulse transcending, though to be sure operating within, history. In deciphering history's ethnographic artifacts the historian recovers the story of the religious life of New World black folks precisely as the movement of an African consciousness.

To fully appreciate *Slave Religion* one must situate its argument within the Herskovits-Frazier debate, which chapter 2 of *Slave Religion*, "Death of the Gods," aptly summarizes.[13] A number of twists and turns marked the debate; but what was at issue came down to this: how do we account for the difference in cultural sensibilities (i.e., religion, music, art, etc.) among peoples of African descent over against the dominant and New World enslaving culture? With respect to slave religiosity, as Lawrence Levine put it, this is really "a question of origins:"[14] did the cultural and religious distinctiveness of diasporic African peoples reside in the presence or lack of certain African retentions or Africanisms? E. Franklin Frazier, a University of Chicago sociologist, answered negatively, claiming that, as Raboteau summarizes him, "African traditions and practices did not take root and survive in the United States. It is Frazier's position," says Raboteau, "that the process of enslavement and the passing of earlier generations born in Africa destroyed the culture of the slaves. The vacuum thus created was filled by Christianity, which became the new bond of social cohesion."[15] The 'process of enslavement' was deculturative, claimed Frazier. That is, slavery in the North American situation utterly stripped the slaves of any substantive links (i.e., language, familial and religious bonds, etc.) with Africa for all practical purposes eradicating "African memories… patterns of behavior and attitudes toward the

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[13] Cf. Ibid., 48-55. For original representative sources of the two sides of the debate see E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (1974) and Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958). For an insightful analysis of the development of Herskovit's that situates him in the field of American anthropology see Walter Jackson, "Melville Herskovits and the Search for Afro-American Culture," in *Malinowski, Rivers, Benedict and Others: Essays on Culture and Personality*, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr., History of Anthropology (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).. Other important essays on the question of Africanisms and the Frazier-Herskovits are Joseph E. Holloway, "The Origins of African-American Culture," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990). and Steve Vaughn, "Making Jesus Black: The Historiographical Debate on the Roots of African-American Christianity," *The Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 1 (1997). The latter places the discussion in the context of African American Christianity.

[14] Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 19-30.

[15] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 52.

world…" Again summarizing and quoting Frazier, Raboteau says, "Slaves had to develop "new habits and attitudes" in order "to meet new situations.""[16] Thus, there is no continuity with the African past. There is only an assimilated American present for rendering the African, in effect, nothing but American. With respect to religion, Christianity proved central to slave assimilation and the transition from African to American. Through its images and the stories of the Bible, slaves and their progeny lived in light of a new symbol system, as it were, arriving at a "new world-view," one that, given the new situation, "gave meaning to life."[17] So, on the question of origins, that is, on the question of whether the cultural and religious distinctiveness of diasporic African peoples resided in the persistence of certain African retentions, Frazier responded negatively. He argued that the process of enslavement destroyed anything identifiably African about African people. Raboteau does not delve further into Frazier's constructive argument. But the most important dimensions of his argument Raboteau aptly captures. In Frazier's thought Christianity is an outpost of what it means for the once African slave to be an American. Christianity is to be understood as the religious dimension of American and, indeed, of Western cultural life. Thus, Frazier relocates African identity in American identity. Due to the close, almost identifiable link, between America or the New World with Christianity, the African and their sacred cosmos fades in the official, as it were, religion of the West, Christianity. In this schema, however, Christianity submits to an alien logic. That is, it remains cop-opted within the logic of modern racism as a colonized and colonizing discourse—a discourse working in the interests of racialized objectifying power.

Frazier's position was in diametric opposition to that of the noted anthropologist, Melville J. Herskovits. More specifically, it was in direct opposition to the position of the later Herskovits, the Herskovits of *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Before considering the position of the later Herskovits as it frames Raboteau's argument in *Slave Religion*, it might be helpful to sketch the general thought of the earlier Herskovits. Herskovits had a distinguished career as an anthropologist, having trained under Franz Boas, often called the father of American anthropology. Boas received his training as an anthropologist in the Berlin school of ethnology, which, it is important to note, was applying certain aspects of German Idealism, Romanticism,

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[16] Ibid., 54.

[17] Ibid., 52-53.

and rationalist philosophy to the emerging field of ethnology. There were two conflicting strands to the Boasian tradition of anthropology that in effect determined the thought of the early and later Herskovits. According to Adam Kuper, the Boasian tradition "wavered between describing [culture] as an accidental accretion of traits and as "an integrated spiritual totality," animated by the "genius" of "a people.""[18] The former strand tends towards a kind of assimilationism on the question of culture by promoting a kind of universal homogeneity. Describing culture as "an accidental accretion of traits" precisely minimizes and relatives, if not outright denies, the distinctiveness of people groups; for, in the end, it begs the question of "an accidental accretion of traits" to what. It is this 'what' that is at issue. The first strand understood this unifying 'what' in such a way that lead certain of Boas's followers, like the early Herskovits, to speak more of "culture," and not "a culture" or "cultures" in the plural. Culture, in the singular, is this unifying "what," and as such it mitigates against the elevation of any particular racial group over another. For all racial groups converge in culture. The cultural critical edge to the first strand of Boasian thought is certainly present. And insofar as the early Herskovits goes in the direction of the first strand of Boasian thought his thought has precisely the same critical edge as well. One sees this in Herskovits's criticisms of the racist and anti-Semitic tendencies in American life. He, as did Boas, proclaimed instead the fundamental similarities of all peoples in the United States of America. That is to say, behavioral differences (what are now commonly referred to as 'cultural differences') are neither biologically encoded nor psychically enshrined. The earlier Herskovits as first strand Boasian thinker advances a theory of culture that is in direct opposition to racialist hypotheses, whether those emerging by way of Lamarckianism or those coming by way of the cultural evolutionists.[19] Culture, as understood by the early Herskovits, names that in which all humans exist on a level playing field, as it were. In short, his understanding of culture looks a lot like the universal Reason of the German philosophic tradition extending back to Kant and his anthropological writings, however, with an attempt to distance it from its racist transcendental qua anthropo-logic. It is also interesting to note that the early Herskovits through imbibing the

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[18] Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 60-61. See also George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 76-77.

[19] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner and Paul Lakeland, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 23.

first strand of Boasian thought—a position of assimilationism—proves to be quite close, at least in conclusions, to Frazier's position in *The Negro Churches in America*, and as represented in Raboteau's *Slave Religion*.[20]

Despite its critique of racism in America, Herskovits, nevertheless found himself, as Walter Jackson observes, "the odd man out" (such would also be the case even after going in the opposite direction in *The Myth of the Negro Past*).[21] The problem was that the self-proclaimed *New Negro* of the Harlem Renaissance did not have a self-understanding consonant with the thinking of the early Herskovits. Harlem Renaissance thinkers instead were moving more in the direction of the second strand of Boasian thought, which transformed understandings of "race" and "culture" precisely by attending more closely to the distinctive marks of people groups and reveling therein. Modern American cultural nationalism, cultural pluralism, and the Harlem Renaissance were going in the direction of an imaginative transformation of what it meant to be American by conceiving of American culture as polyvalent and bearing the insignia of dialogism (to use M. M. Bakhtin's term). That is, American modernism, including the Harlem Renaissance epoch, interpreted what it meant to be black, white, and even American no longer in racially monolithic terms, while at the same time moving towards a radical appreciation of what is distinctive in the polyphonous American national life. In short, a reckoning with cultural pluralism was dawning. This lead the *New Negro* to a self-understanding that required a deep appreciation of what is uniquely African about Afro-Americans. However, the new configuration envisioned by Harlem Renaissance thinkers was not an argument for a reverse valorization of a monolithic blackness in place of a static whiteness. Borrowing from Victor Anderson, to do so would have been simply to (re-)institute "the blackness that whiteness created."[22] As George Hutchinson says, "Claiming cultural nationalism…was not in simple opposition to some monolithic white concept; it was part of a broad movement of imaginative transformation we have little acknowledged, precipitated in part by the dramatic changes in material relations that brought members of formerly segregated groups together in liminal spaces of relative speculative

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[20] For a detailed and important consideration of Herskovits's early thought this see Jackson, "Melville Herskovits,"..

[21] Ibid.

[22] Cf. Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995)

freedom, transracial commerce and conflict, and intellectual experimentation."[23] The literature of this period abundantly witnesses to this phenomenon. The early Herskovits found himself "the odd man out" because his thought lacked the presence of a black nationalism that appreciated the uniqueness of black folks, a uniqueness that could simultaneously assist in constructing a broader American cultural nationalism. This broader American cultural nationalism would radically subvert the racist disjuncture between black and white and the racist practices following therefrom, but without, at least this was the hope of many (like Alaine Locke, for example) trading on racial reasoning and metaphysical thinking.

Being a good Boasian anthropologist, however, Herskovits did fieldwork. This fieldwork centered on various diasporic African peoples. His conclusions lead him more in the direction of the second strand of Boasian thought in the 1930s, and thus closer to Harlem Renaissance thinkers. His efforts culminated in *The Myth of the Negro Past*. The new direction of his thought received praise from such luminaries as W.E.B. DuBois, for example. You will recall that, according to Kuper, the second strand of Boasian thought, also indebted to certain Germanic associations, envisions culture as "an integrated spiritual totality," animated by the "genius" of "a people.""[24] This way of conceiving culture allows one to speak more freely of a culture or cultures, in the plural. Furthermore, conceiving culture as marked by "the 'genius' of 'a people,'" while at the same time not rooting genius in biology causes other factors such as the social and historical determination of culture(s) to figure centrally into the equation. Capitalizing on the second strand of Boasian anthropology allows one to see genius in precisely the supposed grotesquery of blackness and the various ways in which blackness is enacted. The second strand, in other words, draws on what is unique and specific about a people to de-center more thoroughly the category of race. The formation of "racial groups, Boas argued, is a social rather than a biological phenomenon."[25] This meant, as Hutchinson says reflecting on Boas, "Cultures should be understood on their own terms, as having developed within specific circumstances, with their own specific histories and standards of judgment."[26] To understand a culture on its

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[23] Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 31.

[24] Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, 61.

[25] Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 65.

[26] Ibid.

own terms is to understand it as a development within its own specific history, a history whose hermeneutic is embedded within itself. Hutchinson observes that Boas and his students recognized the need of a historical method able to recover and uncover the specific histories of cultural groups. Thus, they advanced a new method of historical inquiry that "carefully [collects] the folklore and material culture of an area and [arranges] it according to the canons of interpretation used by the culture itself."[27] Ethnography, in short, through the analysis of language, aesthetic and literary productions, folk artifacts, and religion is now history, telling the story of the *Volksgeist*. History takes on the utmost importance, something that cannot necessarily be said about the first Boasian strand. But, even here the question of history must undergo further interrogation; for instead of being guided by Hegel's *Geist* realizing itself in history, one wonders whether the unfolding Hegelian *Geist* has be supplanted by an unfolding Herderian *Volksgeist*. Kathryn Tanner also observes the centrality of history for the new way of studying culture(s) and its Germanic tendencies, though she offers no specifics about these tendencies. Her observations are, nevertheless, worth quoting. She says,

> Differences in customs, values, and beliefs [become]…one might say, their own principles of interpretation; there [is] no secondary principle of biology or universal principle of psychic law working, in, through, and behind them. They sustained *themselves* simply by being repeated and by the force of habit and traditional authority that such repetition generated. They sustained themselves, in other words, mainly through unconscious processes of habitual repetition…The specific historical context of a people's practice was itself therefore the primary explanation of differences among peoples' customs, values, or worldviews. In keeping with the specific Germanic associations of *Kultur* with the inherited traditions of particular locales, these different historical contacts were termed cultures.[28]

It is worth noting again that this turn to what is distinctive about a people group does not necessarily open onto a black nationalism that makes blackness the index of the real over whiteness, though it certainly could. Rather, the argument against racism moves into the register of cultural *hybridity* where pluralism marks America—a pluralism that takes seriously the multiplicity of differences constituting the American cultural and national identity. The question of people groups becomes an immanently and unapologetically political question precisely

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[27] Ibid., 66.

[28] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 23.

because culture(s) becomes dislodged from a biologically determined notion of race. This marks an important shift from the first strand of Boasian thought that, though resisting a racially determined notion of culture, nevertheless through its assimilationist endeavors located people groups within an overarching sameness, namely, the sameness that is America. In this sense, America functions somewhat like a race category that washes away the particularities of race groups into what it means to be American. In short, it is the melting pot notion. But the quasi-race category of America could easily be understood as whiteness, as often it was. And in this respect, first strand Boasian thought fails to de-center the category of race and dislodge it from modern metaphysics. This was the risk of the first Boasian strand of thought. The late Herskovits of *The Myth of the Negro Past* joined a number of Boas's other students, like Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict and the folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, for example, in developing the second strand of Boas's thought. But the question it must answer is whether it succeeds any further in actually de-centering race as a "strong" or founding category. There is reason to believe it does not either, and to the extent that it does not it continues to trade on modern metaphysical or transcendental thinking, colonial thought, and modern race theory.

Thoroughly addressing this matter, an immanently important question to be sure, would certainly require a monograph in its own right. I only want to address the matter so far as it affects Black religious studies and theological research, which brings me back to *Slave Religion*. How does Raboteau in *Slave Religion* appropriate the Herskovits's research as signaled in *The Myth of the Negro Past*? Does his appropriation of this research ultimately collapse into a stable African and metaphysical essence that prevents the appearance of the new so as to theologically destablize the category of race? In answering this question it is important to observe what Raboteau takes to be the extremities of Herskovits's position. Herskovits divides the "myth of the Negro past" into a constellation of five submyths: that (1) black folks are childlike by nature; (2) only the genetically inferior stock of Africans underwent enslavement; (3) there was no uniting ethos for the enslaved Africans who came from all quarters of the continent; (4) the advanced civilization of the European and Euro-American master was so attractive to the enslaved African over their own savage level of existence, that they would have gladly traded in their own cultural vestiges and heritage had it persisted; and (5) black folks, given all of this, are a people without a past because slavery thoroughly emaciated that past assigning it to nonexistence. Where does Raboteau take issue with Herskovits? Well, it turns out that he does

not take issue with anything material or substantive with Herskovits deconstruction of 'the Negro myth.' One might his qualms, at least as registered in *Slave Religion*, quibbles. But the quibbles raise a most important question germane to the fundamental questions being raised about the argument of *Slave Religion* and the space it leaves for theology.

Consider, for example, Raboteau's critique of Herskovits's claim that Christian baptism as practiced in Afro-Christianity is an Africanism, a specific African retention from water cults in Africa (Nigeria and Dahomey). According to Herskovits, as Raboteau summarizes, "The Baptists' insistence on immersion was an attractive rite to Africans familiar with water cults because the concept of baptism is one "that any African would find readily understandable." In Africa, Dutch Guiana, and Haiti, possession by water spirits drives the possessed devotee to hurl himself bodily into a stream, pond, or river. Similarly," Raboteau continues in summarizing Herskovits, "in the baptismal service of rural black Baptists the spirit falls upon the new Christian emerging from the water…"[29] Raboteau faults Herskovits because of the insufficiency of the example to make the case that an African survival is at work. In registering his qualm with Herskovits's example, Raboteau observes that the descent of the Holy Spirit at baptism has the warrant of scripture.[30] This example, therefore, only shows that "culture contact was not in every case culture conflict." There can be congruity in outward expression between features of African ritual life, say, in the water cults, and (European and Euro-American) Christian ritual practice, say, in the descent of the Spirit in baptism. Raboteau's quibble, in short, is that Herskovits has given an example of commonality in outward expression and similarity in new syncretistic exterior form. That is, he has given an example of the ability of external African religious practice to adapt to new circumstances in the acculturative process. He has not shown, and this seems to be where Raboteau seeks to lay the force of his critique, how something distinctively African persists under and behind European forms. For the descent of the Spirit at baptism admits of explanation on purely Christian or scriptural grounds. As Steven Vaughn astutely observes, Raboteau does not "[debate] the validity of Herskovits' search for "archaic

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[29] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 57.

[30] Ibid., 58.

retentions"…Rather than question Herskovits' premise, Raboteau only questions his analogy."[31] The attempt to uncover a stable African self that persists under the phenomenon of New World black existence and religious life, nevertheless, remains. What therefore must be shown with respect to Christianity is not, say in the case of Christian baptism among slaves for example, that slaves gravitated to Christianity, or more specifically to the Baptist denomination, because they saw in it conceptual similarities or it triggered a African cultural memory of African water cults. Raboteau says this is susceptible to explanation *within* the terms of Christianity alone.

Raboteau recognizes the need to go further than Herskovits in order to make Herskovits's his case better than or more convincingly than Herskovits. Drawing on an essay by Erika Bourguignon, Raboteau parses (quoting her) "two distinct levels of ethnographic "fact": an observable behavior pattern and a system of cultural beliefs and interpretations. These…structure behavior."[32] Raboteau elaborates on Bourguignon, saying, "though not separated in fact, there are two aspects which should be distinguished for the sake of clarity in discussion: the faith context, in which the possession experience occurs and the patterned style of outward response by which the ecstatic experience is manifest."[33] He continues: "On the level of theological interpretation and meaning, African spirit possession differs significantly from the shouting experience found in the revivalist tradition of American evangelicalism."[34] This is where Raboteau faults Herskovits. Herskovits has insufficiently distinguished between Christian and African forms of Spirit possession, seeing continuity where he should in fact be seeing discontinuity. In the case of the African gods, the personality of the gods displaces that of the devotee's. "Personality traits of the god are expressed in the patterned action of the possessed devotee who makes the god present to the cult community…The devotee becomes the carrier of

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[31] Vaughn, "Making Jesus Black: The Historiographical Debate on the Roots of African-American Christianity," 27.

[32] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 63. This quote from Erika Bourguignon comes from "Ritual Dissociation…" enter the details in Endnote.

[33] Ibid. Raboteau's language of a patterned "style" to interpret Bourguignon is important in that it has certain Tillichian resonances. I am thinking of his theology of culture. I shall more to say about this below when I address the Tillichian dimensions of James H. Cone's theology.

[34] Ibid.

the god."[35] However, in the phenomenon of Christian ecstasy in the Holy Spirit there is no such displacement of the personality of the worshipper. The difference here, claims Raboteau, is of the utmost significance, for it places the experience at issue in differing belief contexts, thus rendering them susceptible to differing interpretations. Raboteau says, "The context of belief shapes the possession experience and determines the manner in which the experience is interpreted." On the level of faith event, susceptible to theological interpretation, there are incommensurable hermeneutic contexts at work. "While there may be similar effects…on this level of faith event," Raboteau says, "there are major differences between spirit possession as it occurs in African and Latin American cults, on the one hand, and the ecstatic shouting experience of United States revivalism, on the other." The ultimate conclusion: "There is discontinuity, then, between the African heritage…and the black [Christian]…tradition in the United States [*sic*]."[36] The African gods are not present here, particularly with respect to the North American context. Supposedly, the Trinitarian God of Christian faith, insofar as one speaks concerning Christianity, is present. But it should be observed that the Christian God, even here, is a datum of ethnography, a certain ethnographic "fact" visible in the proper sense to the ethnographer and anthropologist *qua* historian in his or her search for what is unique and distinctive of a people. The reality of the Christian God is under certain ethnographic qualification and control. How that control functions shall be made more apparent momentarily.

What, however, are we to make of the second level of ethnographic "fact" that concerns the "patterned style of outward response"? Raboteau sees continuity on this level of ethnographic fact. The second level of ethnographic fact requires explanation beyond that available through specific theological sensibilities, whether Christian, Muslim or what have you. "The patterns of motor behavior preceding and following the ecstatic experience" may be revelatory, of course under ethnographic scrutiny, of continuity between African and African American forms of spirit possession."[37] In this "it appears from early accounts that the African tradition of "danced

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[35] Ibid. See also p. 58 where Raboteau observes that "the African devotee is possed by the god who has replaced his personality and who impels him into the water, the god's own element…"

[36] Ibid., 64.

[37] Ibid., 65.

religion" retained a strong hold on the religious behavior of the slaves."[38] Raboteau sees this as going a long way in explaining the distinctiveness of the religious singing of blacks over against the songs represented in a standard Protestant hymnal. Furthermore, it goes far in explaining the distinctiveness of the black spirituals, blues, and much of New World black music and folklore as a whole. It is here that one enters the presence of African retentions or Africanisms. Raboteau seizes upon a number to examples to drive home the point. The examples range from the Christian to the non-Christian. In all cases the manner of patterned expression exemplifies the African spirit persisting in New World circumstances. The upshot is this: "In the ring shout and allied patterns of ecstatic behavior, the African heritage of dance found expression in the evangelical religion of the American slaves." Raboteau concedes that "different theological meanings are expressed and experienced in each. But similar patterns of response—rhythmic clapping, ring-dancing, styles of singing, all of which result in or from the state-of-possession trance—reveal the slaves African religious background." Thus, "the shout is a (more) convincing example of Herskovits' theory of reinterpretation of African traditions; for the situation of the camp-meeting revival, where enthusiastic and ecstatic religious behavior was encouraged, presented a congenial setting for slaves to merge African patterns of response with Christian interpretations of the experience of spirit possession, an experience shared by both blacks and whites."[39]

Religion, Africanity, and Theology: Questions

To this point one, I think, one must concede that on the level of the patterned of style African religious sensibilities, that is, on the second level of ethnographic "fact," Raboteau succeeds in explaining the plasticity of African expressiveness as an index of a kind of African cultural resilience. As he says as early as early as p. 4 of *Slave Religion*, the transmission of the African heritage was not be by way of "static 'Africanisms' or…archaic 'retentions.'" He cautioned early on that historical investigation shows that that which is African about African diasporic people displays adaptivity. The African inheritance bequeathed to New World black folks is better described as so many "living traditions" rather than reified practices that have

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 72.

"[put] down new roots in new soil bearing new fruit and producing unique hybrids of American origin."[40] At the root of African cultures as found on New World soil is the vitality of its spirituality, the openness of its religious sensibilities to unite syncretically "with other religious traditions" and yet maintain "the continuity of a distinctively African religious consciousness."[41]

Yet, it is here that I wonder whether the discourse of *Slave Religion* retreats from this opening position back into the logic of static and stable African or racial essence. Raboteau refers to an account in the autobiography of A. M. E. Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne in which Payne converses with the leader of a ring band in which there was dancing, hand clapping, singing and the rocking of the body to and fro in the conversion of blacks to the Christian faith. The leader speaking to Payne, as recorded in his autobiography and recorded in Raboteau's text, says, "Sinners won't get converted unless there is a ring…The Spirit of God works upon people in different ways. At camp-meeting there must be a ring here, a ring there, a ring over yonder, or sinners will not get converted." To this Payne vigorously dissented, saying, "You might sing till you fell down dead, and you would fail to convert a single sinner…"[42] Raboteau, commenting on this dispute, says, "the argument…between Bishop Payne and the leader of the ring-shout hints at a deeper level of reinterpretation."[43] In what sense? Having had the dispute with the band- or ring-leader, Payne says, "These "Bands" I have had to encounter in many places…To the most thoughtful…I usually succeeded in making the "Band" disgusting; but by the ignorant masses…it was regarded as the essence of religion."[44] From this Raboteau gleans what may in fact be "a deeper level of reinterpretation" of the African heritage than first meets the eye. [45] In explaining the "deeper level of reinterpretation," he says,

> If, as Payne claims, the "ignorant masses" (read "less acculturated") regarded the ring shout "as the essence of religion," and if the shout leader's contention that "without a ring sinners won't get converted" was representative of general belief, the "holy dance" of the shout may very well have been a two-way bridge connecting the core of West African

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40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 5.

42 Ibid., 69.

43 Ibid., 72.

44 Ibid., 69.

45 Ibid., 72.

> religions—possession by the gods—to the core of evangelical Protestantism—experience of conversion.[46]

This is a tightly qualified observation on Raboteau's part with its double conditional, but its effects for his argument are enormous. Raboteau has made the important distinction between levels of ethnographic "fact": the fact of faith context in which there is theological discontinuity with the African gods and gods in the New World situation, and the fact of style of outward response in which there is continuity with the African gods in the New World situation. The continuity of outward style varies only in degree in the movement from Africa to South America to the Caribbean to North America. Nevertheless, under ethnographic scrutiny, it is evident that African gods persist in a new Afro-America situation. Capitalizing, however, on the dispute between Payne and the "Band" leader, Raboteau pushes the ethnographic observation further. For is it now not the case that on the second level of ethnographic fact, the level of stylistic continuity, the first level of ethnographic fact, the level of supposed theological discontinuity, is smuggled back in? The outward stylistic expression is susceptible now to interpretation within either West African religions or evangelical Protestantism and this, even if the worshipper is in a Christian faith context. But, does this not fundamentally collapse the distinction between the levels of ethnographic fact, ultimately surrendering the theological to policing under the ethnographic gaze? This, it would appear, is the deeper level of reinterpretation. Immediately following the remarks on the Payne–"Band"-leader difference of opinion, Raboteau says,

> There are hints that the process of conversion may have been related in the slaves' minds to the African-style period of initiation into the cults of the gods. Slaves customarily spoke of the period of seeking conversion as "mourning" and thought of it as a time when the sinner should go apart, alone, to a quiet place to struggle with his sins. This period and place of retirement resemble the novitiate of West African and Caribbean cults…[47]

Raboteau then proceeds to link this phenomenon back to West Africa by a route that passes through the Caribbean isles and South American. But do not these claims raise more questions than they answer? For, first of all, one must ask, under what conditions can what the slave was thinking be made available to the historian so as to see through the immediate faith context (i.e.,

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[46] Ibid., 72-73.

[47] Ibid., 73.

the first level of ethnographic fact) into a more fundamental faith context operating behind it (i.e., that of the cults of the African gods)? Could it be that the conditions of possibility for this rest not in history but in a certain ethnographic gaze and posture with respect to the arti-"facts" constituting history? But if this gaze, is not historically situated, but rather confers meaning on, sees the meaning in, or discerns the *logos* of the arti-"facts" of history—supremely that all important arti-"fact" of black faith—where then could the gaze itself possibly be? In other words, from where does the ethnographic gaze, which operates like a phenomenological gaze and the *epoché* made available in its eidetic reduction, proceed?

I would raise the same questions regarding Raboteau's handling of Afro-American spirituals, which he situates within this "deeper level of reinterpretation." Raboteau makes the observation that "ring shouts were also called "running sperichils.""[48] He then observes that "while the lyrics and themes of the spirituals were drawn from Biblical verses and Christian hymns, and although the music and melodies were strongly influenced by the sacred and secular songs of white Americans, the style in which the slaves sang the spirituals was African."[49] Once again, Raboteau seems to posit a transparency to the ethnographic "fact" of stylistic pattern in order to see a more fundamental faith or spiritual context than that articulable in the terms of Christianity (particularly with regard to those spirituals that sought to speak of the world in precisely Christian terms and in light of the exigencies of New World culture contact). Yet the earlier claim was that on the level of faith context, the first level of ethnographic "fact," there was discontinuity so that the immediate faith context in the New World situation can be taken with just as much seriousness as is the unique stylistic expression with continuous ties to the African context. Raboteau, on the question of the spirituals, concedes that they were "performed in praise of the Christian God." There, however, is an interesting ambiguity in his further assessment that in the spirituals "the names and the words of the African gods were replaced by Biblical figures and Christian imagery." Nevertheless, one wonders whether it is the primordially African self in praise of the African gods, albeit renamed under biblical figures and Christian imagery, that remains intact and at work. Raboteau's deeper level of reinterpretation seems to suggest that this is the case, and this brings to the fore a most important question.

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[48] Ibid.

I prefaced Raboteau's relationship to the thought of the later Herskovits of *The Myth of the Negro Past* with a consideration of the broader sweep of Herskovits's thought. I observed that the early Herskovits was "the odd man out" with Harlem Renaissance thinkers because of the assimilationist tenor of his thought. This was the Herskovits of the 1920s. I then noted that Herskovits, due to intimate and sustained contact with a number of Harlem Renaissance thinkers, such as Alain Locke, started to take more seriously the presence of something distinctly African about New World black folks this among other things drove him to renewed anthropological fieldwork. He started to document the new movement of his thought with a 1930 essay and culminated in *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Alain Locke's review of *The Myth of the Negro Past,* which chides Herskovits, is salutary for what he praises and decries about the book. It revolves around the claim that race and culture are not always identical. The review of *The Myth of the Negro Past* was part of a retrospective review of black literature that Locke wrote for the journal *Opportunity* in 1942. In explicating the question, Who is "Negro"?, as a lens through which to interrogate a number of literary productions, Locke says, "[A] school of thought or art or social theory that lays claim to totalitarian rectitude must, I think, be challenged. The fallacy of the "new" as of the "older" thinking is that there is a type Negro who, either qualitatively or quantitatively, is the type symbol of the entire group. To break arbitrary stereotypes it is necessary to bring forth perhaps counter-stereotypes, but none are adequate substitutes for the whole truth. There is, in brief, no "*The Negro*.""[50] Thus, for Locke, there is no cultural or racial purism, which reduces black folks to a monolithic type called "Negro." Locke, on the contrary, speaks of "the variety of Negro types and their social and cultural milieu."[51] What then is a counter-stereotype, and what is its function? Counter-stereotypes, according to Locke, retrieve the notion of race, but not as a pure category or biological product. That is, it speaks of race, but not with a view towards repristinating the real or true Negro. Race becomes a way of highlighting "the composite character" of culture. The danger, as Locke sees it, is that the counter-stereotype becomes a hard and fast racial and inflexible stereotype, thus erring in the opposite direction. We are now in a position to better appreciate Locke's critique of *The Myth of*

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[49] Ibid., 73-74.

[50] Alain Locke, "Who and What Is "Negro"?," in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. Leonard Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 210.

[51] Ibid., 211.

the Negro Past and to better understand the question I am raising with respect to *Slave Religion*, which is deeply indebted to the thought of the later Herskovits. Locke praises *The Myth of the Negro Past* because it chronicles "a story of reciprocal cultural interchange and influence, of Negro on white, and white on Negro, and constitutes a pioneer contribution to the ground problems of acculturation as it has affected the African peoples and their descendents."[52] One can see the influence of Herskovits's notion of a "reciprocal cultural interchange and influence," as Locke calls its, on Raboteau's claim that the African heritage is malleable, able both to influence and be influenced by the New World context in which African peoples and their descendents find themselves. But Locke also chides Herskovits, saying,

> But here again, a reformist zeal overemphasizes the thesis of African survivals, transforming it into a profitable working hypothesis to a dogmatic obsession…Instead of suggesting the African mores and dispositions as conducive factors along with other more immediate environmental ones, the whole force of the explanation, in many instances, pivots on Africanisms and their sturdy, stubborn survival. The extreme logic of such a position might, as a matter of fact, damn the Negro as more basically peculiar and unassimilable than he actually is or proved himself to be. As elsewhere, the truth would seem to be in between either extreme of interpretation, either that of the Negro as the empty-handed, parasitic imitator or that of the incurably atavistic nativist. In fact, because of his forced dispersion and enforced miscegenation, the Negro must eventually be recognized as cultural composite of more than ethnic complexity and cultural potentiality.[53]

Locke here reprimands Herskovits for veering towards the opposite extreme of objectifying his counter-stereotype and intimating its use for other than a working hypothesis. In this, as Locke sees it, Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* verges on inversely repristinating the logic of a purism of race and culture that ultimately collapse into one another. This is fundamentally the question being raised with respect to *Slave Religion*. In following Herskovits logic on African retentions in essentials with for the most part only immaterial quibbles, has Raboteau with the resources of anthropology and ethnography merely recuperated the logic of modern racism under the auspices of the African as a pure category? Has he ultimately been telling the story of an intact and untrammeled racial self now, however, inflected as African, hermetically sealed unto itself? And is this not an anthropology of self-enclosure that is part of modern Enlightenment

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[52] Ibid., 225.

anthropology, as seen for example in the anthropological writings of Immnanuel Kant, and the race and colonial theory it spawned? If this is the case, to what extent can the claim hold that the African heritage is so many living, as opposed to static, traditions?

A final question, however, must be raised? What, in the end, is the ethnographic gaze out to control and police? An answer suggests itself when one considers the effect of the collapsing of the distinction between the two levels of ethnographic "fact," the faith context and pattern of stylistic expression. Is not the effect of the collapse to situate the faith context into that of the pattern of stylistic expression? If this is the case, the pattern of stylistic expression becomes the faith or theological context. And if the faith context now resides in the pattern of stylistic expression which is in strict continuity with the "African" despite the fact that on what might be deemed a surface level the faith context may be Christian, Muslim or what have you, has not theology been basically reduced to ethnography? In short, have we not now encroached upon an idealism of Africanity or blackness that has the policing of Christianity as the means of policing Western imperialist and oppressive ideology at the center of its logic?[54] But again this raises another question: Insofar as modern race theory's constituting moment, as say for example in Kant's transcendental philosophy, requires the policing and colonizing of Christianity, is not this interpretation of slave religion more indebted to the racialized logic of modern metaphysics? Finally, and in the end, is not the policing of Christianity a protective mechanism that ensures against the presence of the theologically novel in the disruption of a persistent racial self?

These questions are of the utmost importance, and Raboteau leaves them somewhat open. That is, the answers are not explicit. Perhaps most important among the questions left open in *Slave Religion* is that of the philosophical and theological, which is to say, hermeneutical,

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Cf. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Signposts in Theology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), especially chapter 5, "Policing the Sublime: A Critique of the Sociology of Religion." Given my consider of *Slave Religion* one wonders is Milbank might not be on to something most important when he says, "American sociology [which for Milbank includes important voices in American anthropology: for example, Talcott Parsons, Clifford Geertz and others] therefore reveals that, as a secular policing, its secret purpose is to ensure that religion is kept, conceptually, at he margins—both denied influence, and yet acclaimed for its transcendent purity. Hence it must be shown to 'really' exist, for all societies, either at the level of ineffable experience, or at the level of the functioning whole, or, again, at the level of 'liminal' transitions, where ambiguities and indeterminations must be negotiated. What is refused here is the idea that religion might enter into the most basic level of the symbolic organization of society, and the most bacic level of its operations of discipline and persuasion, such that one would be unable to abstract a 'society' behind and 'beneath' religion" (109).

apparatus making possible a broader synthetic consideration of the faith experiences of New World Afro-Americans read in light of an African consciousness. For a consideration of this, I will shortly turn to two important Afro-American religious thinkers: Charles H. Long and James H. Cone. Charles H. Long, a historian of religion whose thought moves clearly in the direction of the philosophy of religion, or perhaps better, the hermeneutics of religion, broaches this issue through his theology of opacity. Long's thought, which is experiencing a revival of sorts, is important because it seeks from a philosophical vantage to make sense of the pluralistic nature of black religious experience and the cultural quest for meaning. James H. Cone's black theology of liberation raises similar question but out of the resources of Christian discourse. Interpreting Afro-Christian faith under the sign of blackness is the central commitment of his thought. In this respect, it follows the historical sensibilities expressed in Raboteau's *Slave Religion*, namely, to interpret Afro-Christianity as a moment within black consciousness, whose chief insignia, drawing primarily on the religious ontology of Paul Tillich, is courage. Long and Cone are important to my argument because both are illustrative of the tension in *Slave Religion*. On the one hand, there is the desire to take first level of ethnographic (arti-)"fact," which is the specific faith context, seriously. On the other, there is the quest to theorize in light of second level ethnographic (arti-)"fact." Here there is continuity with the African cultural past, and therefore a plurality of black religious experience united in a more fundamental genesis. As I will show both approaches are fraught with difficulty, for both, albeit in differing way, want to reign in the deleterious effects of a hegemonic Christianity in its coincidence with the modern West. However, in the process, an untrammeled racial self as opaque and African polices and continues the logic of colonizing Christianity by limiting the range of its concerns and the scope of its discourse.