

Revue Faculté des Lettres - N° 12 OCTOBRE 2007

## The Origins of Religion in Black America

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### ملخص باللغة العربية لموضوع:

يتناول هذا الموضوع أصل الدين و اللغة عند الأفارقة السود القانطين بأمريكا. آراء مختلفة و متعددة اختلفت حول نشأة الديانات و اللغات في أمريكا، خاصة عند الإفريقيون منهم. و بما أن الدين عند الأفروأمريكيون كان وسيلة من أجل استرجاع حقوقهم الإنسانية، الاجتماعية و السياسية منذ عهد العبودية الذي يعود إلى القرون السادس و السابع عشر، فإن دراسة نشأة الدين عندهم ضرورية لمعرفة ما إذا كان أصلها إفريقي أم أمريكي.

كل من الباحثين و المؤرخين ملفيل هارتركوفتس Melville. J. Herskovits و كارتر و دسون Carter. G. Woodson، أكدوا أن نشأة الدين عند الأمريكيين ذو الأصل إفريقي كانت في إفريقيا ذاتها و ليس في أمريكا وذلك منذ عهد العبودية الذي يعود إلى القرون 16 و 17. الأفارقة العبيد الذين أوتي بهم من إفريقيا إلى أمريكا تمسكوا بما يسمى African survivals و الدليل القاطع على ذلك اللهجات الإفريقية التي لازالت متداولة ليومنا هذا في اللغة الإنجليزية، نأخذ

على سبيل المثال كلمات أصلها إفريقي وهي: Yam – Goober – Canoe – Banjo زيادة  
على ذلك استعمال القصص الشعبية Folk tales عند الكتاب السود و الأمريكيين البيض أيضا.  
كما أنه هناك بعض العقائد الدينية مستوحاة من وسط إفريقي و لازالت مستعملة إلى يومنا هذا في  
الكنائس مثل الأغاني الدينية Negro spirituals التي تروي معانات العبيد في حياتهم اليومية.  
كما أنه هناك باحثين آخرين يصرون على عدم وجود أي دليل يثبت تأثير إفريقي ديني على  
الأفروأمريكيين.

### The Origins of Religion in Black America:

Controversial ideas over the origins of religion in black America arose among different scholars and anthropologists. Some of them believed that afro- Americans' religions and other aspects of their lives in the New World had been, to a certain extent, influenced by the West African heritage. On the other hand, another group of anthropologists formerly contended that no substantial elements of Africa could affect any aspect of the blacks in America.

Historians and Africanists like Melville J. Herskovits and Carter G. Woodson insisted on demonstrating the way African survivals could shape the life of the blacks in many aspects. African languages, kinship groups, folk tales, African religions, musical and dance forms had been preserved and adjusted according to Afro-Americans' needs in slavery. In language for instance, words like yam, goober, canoe... and banjo are probably derived from an African background. The use of folk tales among blacks and later by white writers is also an evidence of Africanism. And in religion many divinations and cult practices such as "possession"<sup>1</sup> have their roots in Africa.

According to Historian J. H. Franklin, the transplantation and the preservation of African survivals in America are probably due to the blacks' exclusion from the white community. The Negro was compelled to live in a world apart from the dominant class. These conditions encouraged him to shape a culture of his own. In fact, the Negro in the New World was exposed to two environments: the blacks came to America from different African

backgrounds with different languages, cultures, religions, and traditions. They melt with other blacks on the plantation. The interaction between people created different set of customs. Simultaneously the blacks interacted with whites Americans which led, automatically, to a change in cultural patterns.

Historian Peter Kolchin also reacted against the authors who refused to link the blacks' American culture with Africa. He wrote:

~~————~~Historians...performed an extremely valuable service in destroying the myth **that**

~~————~~**That**

slaves were depersonalised somboes and in focusing on slaves as actors who helped shape their own world. In doing so, however, they tended increasingly toward celebration and even mystification of slave life. There consequently appears to be a

**real danger that in rejecting old myths we are in the process of embracing a new one: that of the utopian slave community<sup>2</sup>**

Scholars like E. Franklin Frazier, however, were against the belief that black Americans could be influenced by any aspect of the African heritage on any side. As far as religion is concerned, Frazier and his followers claimed that the blacks were Methodists and Baptists for the simple reason that Methodist and Baptist churches were among the fewer white denominations to welcome the blacks in their congregations. Besides, the decentralization and the congregation autonomy of these bodies enabled the blacks to be members in these white churches. In addition, religion represented for the blacks a means by which they could cope with oppression and the cruel conditions they were subjected to. White evangelical Christians: Baptists and Methodists preached against the evils of human bondage. They freed black slaves and refused to be slave holders. In 1784 the Methodists declared that "slavery was a violent depredation of the rights of nature..."<sup>3</sup>.

Both Methodists and Baptists succeeded in converting large numbers of blacks, slave and free, and welcomed them as members in their churches. Nonetheless, the blacks were unable to achieve positions of true leadership within the white dominated churches. They were segregated in communions and baptisms; they were provided with separate Sunday school classes and were allowed to sit in the rear of the galleries only or what has historically been called "Nigger pews" or "African corners". Besides, by the 1790's overt discrimination became embedded in both churches. The whites realised that the church was responsible for blacks' gatherings which would lead to their unity. This would, subsequently, lead to the loss of control on the plantations.

The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church came to birth as a reaction against the white abuses in the churches. The blacks understood that they could never achieve equality with the whites in their churches and decided to found churches of their own.

The origins of the AME church go back to 1787 under the leadership of Richard Allen (1760 -1831). Allen was born a slave in Philadelphia about 1760. During his childhood, he was sold to a planter in Delaware. When he became a young man, Allen had been converted into Methodism and became a Methodist preacher. With the permission of his master, Allen was allowed to organize prayer meetings on the plantation where he used to live. Allen gathered money and could secure his freedom in 1777. In 1776 he went back to Philadelphia where he could attend the St George's Methodist Church. On some occasions, Allen was allowed to organize prayer meetings for the blacks but as the number of the Negroes in the church started to grow in number some of the white officials became against Allen's preaching and others refused the attendance of the blacks altogether. When one day Allen and his two friends Absolom Jones (1746-1818) and William White (1751-1821) were pulled from their knees during prayer at the St George Church, they understood that the blacks should have a place of worship of their own. With the co-operation of Absolom Jones, Richard Allen founded "The Free - African Society" on 12 May 1787, a mutual aid society with

religious purposes-which was a preliminary step to the formation of "The Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church" in Philadelphia in 1794. With the formation of a black church, Allen and his followers believed that "the slaves did not simply become Christian; they creatively fashioned a Christian tradition to fit their own peculiar experience of enslavement in America"<sup>4</sup>. They had their own preaching and expressed their common sorrows through "Negro Spirituals", religious singings performed by the blacks in the churches as a medium to flee the existing conditions of bondage. "Dere's a great camp meetin' in de promised land, look away in de heaven, Lord...fo' my soul's goin' to heaven jes' sho's you born... Heaven, -Heaven, -every body talkin' \_\_\_\_\_ about Heaven ain't goin' there..."<sup>5</sup>.

That was the cry of the blacks in the churches.

It was not until 1816 that the first independent Afro American denomination came to birth with the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Philadelphia under the leadership of Bishop Richard Allen, followed in 1820 by the foundation of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church



(AMEZ) in New York with Absalom Jones as the first bishop to hold office. The two bishops could no longer agree on doctrinal matters and each one of them decided to found a church of his own. However, despite their differences concerning religious matters, their churches fought for the same objectives. They were hostile to the whites' attempts of repatriating the blacks to Liberia and fought for the full integration of the blacks in the American society. By the mid nineteenth century, they launched missionary activities in Africa. The purpose was to civilize and to Christianize the African blacks. Among the most prominent black missionaries who played a prominent role in Africa were J. W. Gilbert, the founder of a Methodist mission in the Congo (modern Zaire Republic); M. W. Sheppard, the founder of a Presbyterian mission in upper Kasai, Congo in 1891; and Francis Burns and John Roberts who managed to be bishops in the A.M.E. Church in Liberia during the 1890's. Finally, both bishops, Allen and Johns, played a paramount role in rising political consciousness among the black Americans, and contributed in the development of Pan - Africanism which was to be held since 1900. In fact, two

members of the A.M.E.Z. Church were among the initiators of Pan-Africanism in 1900.

Whether for or against the African heritage, Africa is a part of the lives and beliefs of the blacks in America and in one way or another represents their source of inspiration.

**Foot notes:**

1- It is a religious phenomenon in which the enthusiast feels with a deity.

2- Mark. M. Smith, Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South , (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1998), P.48.

3- J. H. Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: a History of Negro Americans, (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1969), P.161.

4- A.Meir and E.Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), P.29.

5- J. H. Franklin, op.cit., P.207.

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- 1- Davis. F. P, The American Negro Reference Book, (New Jersey: Prentice-hall, inc., 1966).
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