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**God and Race in  
American Politics**

A Short History

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS  
PRINCETON AND OXFORD

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## *Intellectual Revitalization*

A key element in the emergence of black civil society was the strengthening of a distinctly African-American religious voice. In point of fact, there never was one African-American voice, but rather a distinctly African-American force field in which different religious expressions arose, merged, competed against each other, and provided an unusual measure of fruitful hybridization. This force field could be traced back into the early national and antebellum periods when African Americans, both slave and free, began to internalize Christian convictions and practices. The Christian beliefs that blacks accepted usually came from evangelical revivalism, but wherever they arose, they were contextualized in

African-American circumstances. Denominational leaders like Richard Allen of the AME Church and the Presbyterian Henry Highland Garnet stressed self-help and self-organization.<sup>4</sup> Various manifestations of "slave religion" existed further outside standard white boundaries but were already solidifying the religion that soon produced the black spirituals.<sup>5</sup> As they arose, these expressions of African-American Christianity almost always represented more than simply a duplication of white religion.

The difference after the Civil War was that the journey of ethical, moral, and theological reflection was becoming a journey of self-determination. The journey was not unrelated to earlier religious experience, but it was now out from under white control and free to develop its own trajectories. For a history of religious thought, narrowly considered, the black story from 1865 to about 1925 is one of increasing depth and diversification. For American history, broadly considered, the story is, again, one of apparent national irrelevance during wilderness years of preparation for a day of future opportunity.

Black religious thought in the generations after the Civil War moved on two levels, even as it moved in many directions. Those two were the realms of formal, elite discourse, and popular, lay-directed experience. The formal realm embraced several, not altogether harmonious, elements. Most prominent in the years surrounding the Civil War were strongly evangelical themes advocated by effective leaders like Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, who after training at the Lutheran Gettysburg Theological Seminary became the leading bishop of the AME Church. Because Payne's evangelicism drew on the same sources as the era's prominent white Protestant teachings, he was regularly moved to warn against "heathenish" practices he found among African Americans,

like the ring shout with its "shouting, jumping, and dancing."<sup>6</sup> But Payne's strong evangelical convictions provided him and many others like him with a formidable depth of conviction and a formidable theological foundation.

Another active element in formal religious thought was Christian universalism, a theme that often emerged naturally with standard evangelical emphases. The Rev. William Christian, founder in 1889 of the Church of the Living God (Christian Workers for Fellowship), consistently preached that, since Jesus had no earthly father, he was "colorless" and belonged to all people.<sup>7</sup> The Rev. Elias Camp Morris, pioneering president of the National Baptist Association, joined Christian in asserting that the message of Christianity was for all people without differentiation everywhere: "The commission which [God] gives is without race, color or condition, but is that the gospel be preached to every creature. . . . 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,' not white sinners, nor black sinners, nor red sinners, but sinners."<sup>8</sup>

Francis Grimké regularly made this same appeal from his Presbyterian church in Washington, D.C., as when in 1916 he complained about the blind spots affecting much contemporary Protestantism. In reflecting on why the revivalist Billy Sunday had been so specific during a recent Washington campaign in denouncing some sins (drunkenness, sexual immorality) but not others (injustice, discrimination, economic oppression), Grimké paused to evaluate what it meant to be evangelized by such a message:

The men and women who come into the church through these evangelistic efforts . . . have no more idea or intention of doing what Jesus wants them to do, except qualifiedly, than they have of butting their

heads against a stone wall. They come into the church and bring with them all their colorphobia. . . . Evangelism of that kind is of no real value. . . . Evangelism that is genuine . . . carries along with it brotherhood, that so presents Jesus Christ that men see, and see plainly, what is involved in accepting Him.<sup>9</sup>

Other elements that contributed to formal religious thought, like a strongly black emphasis, drifted further from standard evangelical themes. Henry McNeal Turner, who became a bishop in the AME Church after extensive military and political experience, wrote famously in 1896 that “God is a Negro,” a claim meant to identify Christianity with outreach to subjugated populations. Turner’s disillusionment with the course of affairs in the United States led him to explore African colonization and to establish ties with black churches in South Africa. He also complained that “the white man” had “colored the Bible in his translation to suit the white man, and made it, in many respects, objectionable to the Negro. And until a company of learned black men shall rise up and retranslate the Bible, it will not be wholly acceptable and in keeping with the higher conceptions of the black man. . . . We need a new translation of the Bible for colored churches.”<sup>10</sup>

A strongly reformist element also shaped black religious thought, although reform could take many different shapes. Booker T. Washington, who promoted industrial vocational education; W.E.B. DuBois, who advocated intellectual and social self-assertion at the highest intellectual levels; and Marcus Garvey, a more secular proponent of emigration, could be harsh critics of each other.<sup>11</sup> But because they shared an eagerness to confront the forces that oppressed

black people, their ideas were easily put to use by individuals representing a wide range of religious views.

By the early twentieth century, formal religious thought by African Americans had reached a relatively sophisticated level in a relatively short period of time. Among the masses of believing blacks, however, populist religious practice counted for more than formal intellectual effort. The strongly emotional and forthrightly physical practices that have been well described by Albert Raboteau, Sylvia Frey, Betty Wood, Eugene Genovese, and other scholars as marking antebellum black Christianity carried over broadly into the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Religious life defined by immediate contact with the divine, Bible knowledge keyed to miraculous interventions and self-sacrificing heroes, spirituals that rehearsed narratives of divine liberation—these and other well-established practices that had sustained African-American Christians in slavery continued to do so after emancipation.

When, near the turn of the century, W.E.B. DuBois visited rural black churches in the South, he described himself as a “school teacher . . . fresh from the East” who “had never seen a Southern Negro revival.” DuBois found much to criticize in “the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy” of African-American worship, but also more than enough to convince him that “the Negro church of today is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.” Especially when he wrote about “the Frenzy”—which “varied in expression from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor”—DuBois was opening up a world of remarkable religious depth and potential social force.<sup>13</sup>