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Lambs of a Foreign God: Christianity in African-American Literature

Maryam F. Mujahid

Senior Honors Thesis
Presented for Departmental Honors in English
at Longwood University

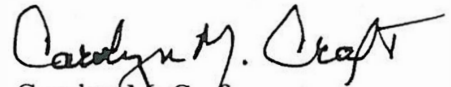


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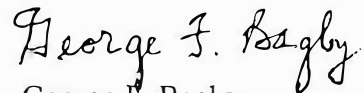
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Christianity played a pivotal role in integrating African slaves, and the generations of African-Americans that succeeded them, into American culture. In fact, for many slaves, it was their conversion to Christianity that was the ultimate and final separation from their African heritage. However, the ignorance that children of African slaves had of their parents' heritage could conceivably stem from more than just their parents' conversion to Christianity; it could just as easily be the result of their parents' inability fully to articulate another culture in their foreign English tongue. Even more likely, African slaves were discouraged by their owners from openly associating themselves with anything African. At any rate, the generations of slaves that followed the initial groups of imported Africans were brought up in Christianity and raised to emulate the culture of their oppressors. Practicing Christianity was necessary for slaves to fit into, as well as survive in, American society.

Although many slaves sincerely and devoutly practiced Christianity, Christianity was more important as a context in which blacks and whites could relate to one another. Major antebellum poets like Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon communicated to whites through their poems with Christian subjects and themes. Using Christianity, the common link between blacks and whites, the poets were able to address many secular issues. This situation is particularly significant for Wheatley, whose scope of writing is far broader than Hammon's. More importantly, however, both poets represented through their lives and their poetry the necessity and ability of slaves to assimilate into white Christian culture.

Just as accepting Christianity helped slaves and slave poets bridge the cultural gap between blacks and whites so that slaves could assimilate into mainstream American society, after slavery ended, many blacks modeled the religious and secular aspects of

their communities after white communities. Postbellum and pre-Harlem Renaissance poets like James Weldon Johnson praise the contribution of slave poets and songwriters.

However, in time a strong and widely felt desire to establish a distinct identity for themselves, particularly in the urban North, led to a yearning to look back at their African heritage. The common thread of Christianity had to be cut in order to gain a sense of cultural independence. Two poets who exemplified this idea in their works are Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, two of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Despite the fact that by and large the majority of twenty-first century blacks do not feel the need to dismiss or reject Christianity in order to have a sense of distinct culture as African-Americans, it is understandable that many blacks because of their history felt this was the only way to attain a separate cultural identity.

Slave Poets: 1773 - 1865

“‘Well,’ said Eliza mournfully, ‘I always thought
that I must obey my master and mistress, or
I couldn’t be a Christian.’” – *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

Until Christianity and Islam entered Africa, Africans generally practiced tribal religions that focused primarily on the family structure, specifically ancestral worship. Many Africans continued to practice these native religions even after Christianity and Islam were introduced. According to John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., the “religion of early Africans can most accurately be described as ancestor worship. Africans believed that the spirits of their ancestors had unlimited powers over their lives [. . .]. Because of the family character of African religions, the priests of the religions were the patriarchs of the families. They were the oldest living members of the descendants of the initial ancestor” (20). By the tenth century, Islam had become the largest non-native religion practiced in Africa. Nonetheless, Franklin and Moss say, “in all probability, the

early influence of the religion of Islam on the African way of life has been greatly exaggerated. This is certainly true for the period before the fourteenth century” (21). The first introduction of Christianity to African culture took place long before the establishment of American slavery. According to Franklin and Moss, however, in “West Africa [. . .] from which the bulk of slaves were secured, Christianity was practically unknown” (22) until the sixteenth century. By the sixteenth century, the “Portuguese began to establish missions in the area” (22).

What is now the United States was beginning to be explored in depth with hopes of European colonization. Franklin and Moss assert that from “the beginning of European exploits in the New World, Africans came as [. . .] servants, and slaves” (22), but it was not until 1517, when a Spanish Bishop permitted “Spaniards to import African slaves, [that] the trading of humans in the New World formally began” (33). Both the West Africans exposed to Christianity by missionaries and those immersed in Christianity through their enslavement found the religion contradictory in nature. According to Franklin and Moss,

It was a strange religion, this Christianity, which taught equality and brotherhood, and at the same time introduced on a large scale the practice of tearing people from their homes and transporting them to a distant land to become slaves [. . .]. They did not have the superhuman capacity to reconcile in their own minds the contradictory character of the new religion. (22)

The Christian concept of “brotherhood” became more difficult to grasp for Africans forced into slavery, when their status had been lowered to that of mere commodity. As

Franklin and Moss emphasize, slaves “were appraised and sold just as any other merchandise” (60).

The slave trade was a growing, profitable enterprise for the traders and buyers, and by the middle of the eighteenth century slaves served as the backbone of the American economic system. Franklin and Moss note that, despite the passive questioning of the “right of one person to hold another in bondage” by such concerned religious organizations as the Quakers, there “had been no frontal attack upon the institution” (68). The population of the United States, which included the newly “imported” Africans and the American born slaves, was increasing steadily. According to Franklin and Moss, in 1790, “the black population [. . .] numbered slightly more than 750,000” (23). Unfortunately, a large portion of the black population was forced into unjust labor: “the vast majority [of slaves], almost 89 percent, lived in the South Atlantic states where the plantation system was making the greatest demands for black labor” (84). Views on slavery generally varied from agreement with the institution for practical economic reasons to indifference due to physical distance from the institution and its obvious injustices.

However, by the nineteenth century, the abolitionist movement was becoming a major socio-political force in America. Thus, Christian slaveholders needed to provide some defense for their seemingly contradictory actions. One of the major defenses was the argument that blacks were not servants, but simply extensions of their masters’ families. According to Janet Duitsman Cornelius, Richard Furman, a prominent Baptist minister, “used the language of the benevolent movement and of conservative social ideology to portray the slave system as a kindly paternalism. The master is the ‘guardian, even father,’ and slaves become ‘a part of the family’” (75). Cornelius goes on to say that

Frederick Dalcho, an established Episcopal minister, agreed with Furman:

“God is the moral governor of the universe; and the rulers of nations and communities, the fathers and families, and owners of slaves, are, each in respective spheres, the head of amoral [sic] government, in subjugation to God, for the good of society, the happiness of the people [. . .].”

Religious instruction for enslaved blacks [. . .] emphasized this “social order and dutifulness.” (75)

Essentially, “an important link was forged in the chain binding the slave missions to a positive defense of the slave system” (75). The other major argument, according to Randy J. Sparks, is that “slavery was a civil institution, not a religious one, and thus beyond the scope of the church’s mission” (282). Both arguments apparently satisfied the Christian South’s goal of alleviating the guilt of hypocrisy and injustice from the consciousness of slaveholders. However, according to C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H.

Mamiya, “Christianity originally provided the major legitimation for the system of slavery in the United States” (281).

While slaves were generally abhorrent of their lot, many eagerly embraced Christianity, the religion of their oppressors. Christianity was particularly attractive to slaves, especially those without ties to Africa, because Christian philosophy stresses the importance and significance of the “afterlife” over life on earth. Considering their plight, slaves were eager to direct their hopes and dreams to a place that had not yet disappointed them. Also, and more importantly, Christianity was an appropriate bridge into white American culture. Lincoln and Mamiya agree: “Culture is the form of religion and religion is the heart of culture” (3). Christianity not only provided an effective tool for partial assimilation; it was also an equalizer. In other words, not only did it allow

slaves the “privilege” of being acknowledged as the fellow child of God to a white, but it also provided the common ground for whites and blacks that led blacks to feel more closely linked to their oppressors than to their African brethren.

Christianity proved an equalizer by being a tool for slaves to foster the notion that they had risen above their former African selves and had become closer to being like their white owners. Lincoln and Mamiya assert that “[. . .] many black and white American missionaries in the nineteenth century [. . .] perceived African culture as pagan and considered Western Christianity as superior” (7). In short, slaves oftentimes used Christianity as a way to equate themselves with whites by mentally raising themselves from their supposedly base past. However, this is not to say that blacks embraced whites along with Christianity, but that the slaves needed to belong to a society after being ripped from that of their ancestors; thus, they had to adapt to and assimilate into white American society as best they could. Also, a lack of self-love imbedded in them by the emotional and physical abuse administered by their masters established and perpetuated the idea that whites were superior to blacks.

Another less profound aspect of Christianity and the newly adopted white culture that the slaves embraced was singing spiritual music. Cornelius says that from “their earliest contacts with missionaries slaves readily embraced and adopted European hymns and harmonies” (18). The term “spirituals” was coined to refer specifically to the Christian music as sung by slaves. One purpose was to give them hope and somehow make their lives more bearable through song. John W. Blassingame explains that “the slaves sought some hope, some solace for their suffering in the spirituals. Toiling from day to day, they sang to lighten their burdens” (70). Also, singing spirituals provided a cathartic effect by allowing slaves to complain about their dismal circumstances.

Blassingame goes on to say that when “there were no whites around, the slaves dropped symbols and expressed their dissatisfaction and longing in unmistakably clear words” (70). However, the most important purpose was a form of clandestine communication. Blassingame states that “frequently, the spirituals dealt with the more prosaic details of slave life. They served for instance, as a secret means of communication” (69). This example helps prove the earlier point that while slaves generally accepted Christianity, they did not embrace or trust whites. This form of communication became extremely important for such non-violent abolitionist rebellions as the Underground Railroad, as well as independent runaway slaves. Ironically, the forced immersion in their oppressors’ religion helped slaves escape from their oppression. Nonetheless, because spirituals are a branch of the Christian music introduced to them by missionaries and/or their masters, spirituals prove to be another way of gaining unsolicited entrance into white society.

However, artistic expression from slaves was not limited to singing spirituals. Some of the few slaves allowed the opportunity of education became poets as early as the eighteenth century. A particularly recurrent subject of American slavery is Christianity; the slave poetry acts as a record of the slaves’ views, though admittedly censored, on Christianity. The depiction of Christianity in the poetry provides a living record that illustrates the reality of the slaves’ acceptance of the religion, their assimilation into society, and the effects of the assimilation. Because the poetry is written by slaves themselves, these poetic records are far more accurate interpretations of slave beliefs than those published by whites. However, it is only fair to keep in mind that these poems were censored by the poets’ white sponsors and white publishers, and so the poetry is undoubtedly fogged by a rose-colored tinting of the slaves’ actual view of Christianity. Many sub-themes of the poetry include thanking God for being introduced to

Christianity, dismissing African religions, calling to those who have not yet embraced Christianity to come forth, asking God for help, and finally, asking white Christians to acknowledge the slaves as legitimate Christians, thus acknowledging their placement and integration into white American society.

Phillis Wheatley, who was brought from Africa as a young child and purchased shortly after “in 1761 by an upper-class Boston couple America as a child” (Hill et. al. 92), “received wide recognition [. . .] for her [. . .] mastery of Western manners and morals” (Franklin and Moss 93). Wheatley wrote primarily, though not exclusively, about Christianity. Her choice of poetic themes stems from her childhood in which “she rapidly learned to read the Bible” (Franklin and Moss 94). Similarly, Wheatley believed that being brought to America was a benevolent intervention by God. In her poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” she opens by asserting that being brought to America was a merciful act of God:

’Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, and there’s a Saviour, too;
Once redemption I neither sought nor knew. (1-4)

Although the literal definition of the word pagan is simply “non-monotheist,” the word has a negative connotation and implies covert intolerance, if not disdain, for her native African heritage.

According to Franklin and Moss, “one of the first blacks to make the search for intellectual and spiritual independence was Jupiter Hammon” (92). “Jupiter Hammon, the often-disregarded forefather of African American literature, was [. . .] born [. . .] on October 17, 1711 [. . .] Hammon, who was a slave in New York all of his life, was

almost fifty years old before he was able to publish his first poem” (Hill et al. 69).

Hammon was especially unbending in his Christian beliefs and went so far as to feel thankful for being a slave. In his poem, “An Address to Miss Wheatly [sic],” the persona tells Phillis Wheatley that being brought over from Africa as a child is something to be very grateful for because it introduced her to Christianity:

God’s tender mercy brought thee here;

Tost o’er the raging main;

In Christian faith thou has a share

Worth all the gold in Spain. (13-16)

The comparison of Christianity and gold emphasizes the persona’s strong belief in the value of Christianity. Also, like Wheatley, Hammon associates an introduction to Christianity with an act of kindness.

Appropriately, not only did Wheatley and Hammon believe that Christian slavery was more appealing than pagan freedom, but they also completely disassociated themselves from the religions of their ancestors. In “To the University of Cambridge, in New England,” Wheatley’s persona denounces her African heritage: “’Twas not long since I left my native shore / The land of errors [. . .]” (3-4). This idea further legitimizes the point that Wheatley’s aforementioned use of the word “pagan” had an underlying negative tone. The separation from African religions shows a particularly strong and ironic Christian belief for Wheatley because, unlike Hammon who was born an American, she has been exposed to at least one African religion and thus can compare it with Christianity. In “An Address to Miss Wheatly [sic],” Hammon’s persona refers to Africans as “heathen”: “Among the heathen live no more, / Come magnify thy God” (44-45). Again, Hammon’s persona in “An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with

Penetential [sic] Cries” further implies that the only true way to heaven is through Christianity: “Salvation comes by Christ alone” (1).

On that note, Hammon’s poetry had a missionary effect by asking God to help other slaves join the Western religion he embraced so zealously. In “An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penetential [sic] Cries,” Hammon’s persona asks God to enlighten all slaves with Christianity: “Lord, turn our dark benighted souls” (29). Further, in “An Address to Miss Wheatly [sic],” Hammon’s persona asks God to bring Africans to America and into the folds of Christianity:

That we poor sinners may obtain
The pardon of our sin;
Dear blessed Jesus now constrain,
And bring us flocking in. (30-33)

Not only does this image of Jesus bringing the slaves “flocking in” illustrate Hammon’s desire to convert free Africans to Christian slaves for their souls’ sake, but also the word “flocking” is ironically reminiscent of a positive migration as opposed to one that ensures a life of cruelty. Hammon obviously believed that, for the slave, the benefits of Christianity far outweighed the consequences of slavery.

For Hammon, the redemption found by accepting Christianity apparently numbed him to the brutality and injustice of slavery. Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon speculate:

Could it be that Jupiter Hammon, a Black man of God and a slave, really did not know how far removed “God’s tender mercy” was from a slave ship? Or could it be that he was so removed from worldly woe and attuned to anticipate heavenly joy that slavery, one of the world’s major

woes, no longer existed for him? [...] Indeed, in “An Evening Thought” the word “salvation” occurs in every stanza, giving some hint of the absorption in Christian otherworldliness that can render a man forgetful of his earthly state. (45)

Whether or not Hammon was truly forgetful of his tragic “earthly state,” he was apparently more comfortable with the life of the lowly Christian slave than that of the free “pagan.”

As Hammon called to God to bring slaves “flocking” into Christianity, later slave poets, who lacked Hammon’s convenient blindness to the sins of his master, asked God for help to overcome the suffering slavery caused. George Moses Horton, who has been called “America’s first Black professional poet” (Barksdale and Kinnamon 219) and began publishing poetry in 1820s, asks for divine guidance in order to rise above the degradation of slavery in his poem “The Slave’s Complaint”:

Heaven! In whom can I confide?

Canst thou not for all provide?

Condescend to be my guide

Forever. (21-24)

The almost sarcastic tone in line 22, as well as the word “condescend” in line 23, denotes a bitterness that was not seen in the poetry of Hammon and Wheatley. Also, the word “complaint” in the title shows that Horton is not merely begging for help, but issuing a complaint to God. Horton was born in North Carolina in 1797; He was an obviously talented young man, and was brought to the “attention of Caroline Lee Hentz, a professor’s wife, author, and abolitionist from Massachusetts. She taught Horton to write and cultivated his interest in reading” (Hill et al. 371). Undoubtedly, the fact that his

writing was applauded early on by an abolitionist afforded him the liberty to write openly against slavery.

Similarly, James M. Whitfield, born in New Hampshire to free blacks in 1823 (Hill et al. 376), wrote out against slavery and sought help from God through his poetry. In “America,” the persona exclaims: “Almighty God! thy aid impart” (107). Again, the sudden emergence of a grimmer tone in slave poetry stems from the slacker censorship of their poetry due to the abolitionist movement. Also, by the mid-nineteenth century, slaves had steadily grown less tolerant of their plight in spite of the glorious afterlife Christianity promised. In addition to using his poetry as a plea to God, and perhaps to his influential abolitionist readers, Whitfield addresses the lack of brotherhood between white Christians and black Christians because of the anti-Christian institution of slavery in his poem, “America.” Whitfield’s persona straightforwardly protests the hypocrisy of white Christians who make use of the system of slavery:

Here Christian writhes in bondage still,
Beneath his brother Christian’s rod,
And pastors trample down at will,
The image of a living God. (93-96)

Again, the grimness is seen, but more importantly Whitfield is very open in his attacks against hypocritical white Christians. Also, lines 95 and 96 suggest why many slaves’ belief in Christianity was crumbling: the duplicity made the idea of a benevolent Christian God abstract and far-fetched. Hill et al. agrees, going on to say, “With force and vigor, he [Whitfield] attacked the United States in “America,” [. . .] for her blatant hypocrisy as demonstrated by her professed [. . .] ideals and her realities of slavery and racism” (375). Though far more subtly, the hypocrisy of many white Christians is addressed earlier in

American history by Phillis Wheatley in “On Being Brought from Africa to America”:

“Remember *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d, and join th’angelic train” (7-8). By directly addressing Christians, presumably White Christians, and reminding them that even blacks can become Christians, Wheatley rebukes those who do not adhere to the Christian principle of brotherhood. Wheatley’s response to hypocrisy was brave, albeit appropriately obscure and passive. However, this approach does not necessarily indicate a less passionate position than that of Whitfield, but merely less freedom to voice her opinions.

On the other hand, some of Wheatley’s poems, despite their conservative eighteenth-century settings, made surprisingly bold attacks on America’s slave system. This is particularly true in “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for North American &c.”:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch’d from *Afric*’s fancy’d happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labor in my parent’s breast? (24-27)

The word “snatch’d” in line 25 has a negative connotation. Further, Wheatley’s interest in the persona’s parents shows that her separation from her heritage is not complete. It is conceivable that despite Phillis Wheatley’s strong Christian beliefs, she was not as inclined to feel grateful for being enslaved as the respective personae in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England” suggest. Alice Walker states that the “key words, as they relate to Phillis [Wheatley], are ‘contrary instincts’ [a phrase Walker takes from Virginia Woolf]. For when we read the poetry of Phillis Wheatley [. . .] evidence of ‘contrary instincts’ is everywhere. Her

loyalties were completely divided, as was, without question, her mind”

(170). Despite Walker’s views, Phillis Wheatley has received much ridicule by later critics for her seemingly complacent acceptance of slavery.

In Wheatley’s defense, one could justly argue that the time, place, and circumstances that surround her ability to get published surely provided limits for how honest she could be. Walker agrees, going on to say,

But at last Phillis [Wheatley], we understand. No more snickering when your stiff, struggling, ambivalent lines are forced on us. We know now that you were not an idiot or a traitor; but a sickly little black girl, snatched from your home and country and made a slave; a woman who still struggled to sing that song that was your gift, although in a land of barbarians who praised you for your bewildered tongue. (71)

While it is not evident that Wheatley was insincere, it is very probable that she was indeed driven by “contrary instincts” that made her struggle between believing Christianity was her true faith, and realizing that she was unjustly separated from her family and heritage by Christians.

Conversely, if Jupiter Hammon was likewise torn by the “contrary instincts” of Phillis Wheatley, it is not evident in his poetry. According to Barksdale and Kinnamon, “his religious fervor seriously impaired his poetry. There is in Jupiter Hammon’s verse none of the felicity of thought [. . .] found in Phillis Wheatley’s poetry. Her subject matter is of broader range, and her classical training disciplined her to take a more balanced view of Man, God, and Nature” (46). Not only was Hammon so preoccupied with the religion that he and Wheatley shared that he could not acknowledge the fact that slavery was unfair, but he actually made comments in the favor of slavery. Barksdale and

Kinnamon state that Hammon felt that “slavery was an endurable and acceptable institution” (46).

Although many slaves could not reconcile themselves with the injustice and hypocrisy of white Christianity forced upon them, they nonetheless embraced the religion as a whole in their search for identity. This acceptance of Christianity served as an appropriate bridge into American society. This assimilation into American society is further explored by poets like James Weldon Johnson and his contemporary, Fenton Johnson. However, James Weldon Johnson represents a continuation of the slave poets’ ideas, while Fenton Johnson sets the foundation for what is to come.

Poets from the Civil War to World War I: 1865 - 1915

Once slavery ended, blacks began forming churches that generally mirrored white churches. However, the American church system was very segregated for the most part. The black church provided a unifying organization for camaraderie and religious brotherhood.

According to C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, although “the first known black Baptist [. . .] was listed as one of fifty-one members of the Newton, Rhode Island, church in 1743” (23), during the next few decades “the preponderance of black Baptists were in the South” (23). By the end of slavery the black Baptist community had grown substantially. Lincoln and Mamiya assert, “[. . .] the number of black Baptists continued to grow, reaching 150,000 by 1850, and nearly 500,000 by 1870 as independent churches proliferated with the demise of slavery” (25). The Baptist church’s growth was not limited to the South; into the twentieth century the Baptist church began to expand to the North in significant numbers. Lincoln and Mamiya note that “Studies done on black urban churches during the period of the great migrations [indicate] [. . .]

they underwent a period of phenomenal growth” (119). They go on to say that “five northern cities (Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Baltimore) showed a 151 percent increase in the number of black Baptist churches, and a 200 percent increase in the number of black Baptist membership” (119) in the two decades following slavery. Considering that most southern blacks were Baptist and that much of the North’s black population during this time consisted of southern migrants, the growth of Baptist churches in the North is understandable.

Not only did the black church provide a unifying sense of brotherhood, it also provided a foundation on which education for blacks was established. After the abolition of slavery and the end of the American Civil War, blacks knew that their only way to true freedom was to attain the education they had been so adamantly denied: an education. However, according to William E. Montgomery, “After the war, southern whites were no more inclined to support universal public education than before” (146). Thus, it was necessary for blacks, particularly those in the South, to establish their own means of educating their children and themselves. The black church system as well as the church’s structure itself proved to be very beneficial in the establishment of black schools in America. Not only were many elementary and secondary schools initially located in church basements, but also some historically black colleges and universities were formed within the black church. Montgomery goes on to say:

The [black] churches assumed a prominent role in planning for and implementing programs of personal and racial uplift through education. As one of the few institutions that was able to provide organization and cohesion within the southern black population in the immediate postwar years, they were in a position to per-

form many useful functions on behalf of education. (148)

Because larger numbers of blacks were educated, literature was being read and written by a larger number of blacks. Education was the essential catalyst for striving to gain racial equality in American society.

Within time, just as the white church is oftentimes divided according to class, the new black elite began to separate themselves from blacks associated with a less affluent socio-economic background. For example, the black upper class formed ties with the Congregational Church because of its efforts to help establish schools for blacks in the south. Lawrence Otis Graham, author of the controversial *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*, says: "The Congregational Church's popularity among the black elite grew from the fact that it was the denomination that had given the greatest support to the American Missionary Association's efforts in establishing secondary schools and colleges for southern blacks in the late 1800s" (13). Because the black upper class had the strongest ties to black colleges and universities, it was natural they would form an allegiance to the whites that had helped establish their schools.

Yet, the separation of upper and lower class blacks stemmed primarily from upper class blacks' desire to distinguish themselves from their poorer and less educated counterparts. Graham asserts that "for some of the most cynical and status-conscious members of the black elite, the two denominations [the primarily white Congregational and Episcopal churches] were particularly appealing simply because most blacks were not of that faith" (13). Nonetheless, considering that the black upper class made up a relatively small percentage of the black population, this class separation was not very significant, and did not dramatically diminish the unity and idea of community that had been formed in the mainstream black church.

Although the church played a central role in the black community, religion was not a predominant subject or theme in the poetry that was produced; between the Civil War and World War I, issues of freedom, equality, and stability were more paramount concerns, and these were reflected in the black poetry of the time. However, in the early twentieth century two black men that did explore Christianity as it relates to the black community were James Weldon Johnson and Fenton Johnson.

According to Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon, James Weldon Johnson “made major contributions to Afro-American literature in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction” (481). Johnson is best known for his dialect poetry and the composition with his brother that later became known as the Negro National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” written in the year 1900. Oftentimes, his poetry tended to acknowledge the contributions of the black slave writers, while reiterating their message of loyalty to Christianity and separation from African religions. In his poem “O Black and Unknown Bards,” composed in 1908, he commemorates slave poets, especially composers of spiritual songs, for their undying faith in Christianity in spite of their inhumane conditions:

There is a wide, wide wonder of it all,
That from their degraded rest and servile toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You-you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown,
unnamed,
Have stretched upward, seeking the divine. (35-43)

Unlike those who criticized poets like Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon for their apparently passive tolerance of slavery, and their love of their oppressors' religion, James Weldon Johnson viewed them as pioneers in the black struggle who never gave up on their faith and passed the importance of Christianity down to successive generations. Robert Fleming asserts:

Throughout the poem ["O Black and Unknown Bards"] he weaves lines from the actual spirituals [. . .] marveling at the ingenuity of the composers, who produced their works without training and under the worst possible conditions. And it is not merely as artistic successes that Johnson views the songs, but as signs of the spiritual depths of their orators. Himself an agnostic, Johnson nevertheless empathizes with the "hungry hearts" of the listeners for whom the songs were composed. Implicit in the poem is a recognition of the importance of intact. (45)

Further, James Weldon Johnson applauds these poets and singers of spirituals for helping to pull blacks from the pagan religions of their African ancestors:

You sang far better than you knew; the songs
That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
Still live—but more than this to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ. (48-51)

In line 51, "wood and stone" directly refers to the man-made god-images of African religions. Like the slave poets' personae, this persona feels that these African gods are inferior to Jesus, and that African religions are inferior to Christianity. In other words, he is in favor of adopting Christianity as practiced by whites, as opposed to looking to his

African heritage and associating with a religion of his ancient ancestors. Unlike the slaves, this persona has the freedom to choose to practice Christianity or not. The fact that he chooses to embrace Christianity shows how deeply this religion has been ingrained in the descendants of slaves, by their masters and enslaved parents. However, it should be noted that, as stated before, Johnson was an agnostic. Thus, his persona is independent of the poet's more detached views, or lack thereof, on Christianity.

Less well known than James Weldon Johnson is Fenton Johnson, whose poetry is almost prophetic in that it is a precursor to the group of Harlem poets who begin to question Christianity and go back to African religions and beliefs. Fenton Johnson, who was born in 1871, never directly aligns himself with African religion or heritage; however, in his poem "Tired," published in 1922, he separates himself from American culture: "I am tired of work; I am tired of building up somebody else's civilization" (1). By referring to America as "somebody else's civilization," the persona distinguishes himself as belonging to another civilization. This poem is revolutionary in its overt anti-assimilation sentiments. Further, the persona associates America's racial injustice with Christianity: "[. . .] let the old shanty go to rot, the white people's clothes turn to dust, and the Calvary Baptist / Church sink to the bottomless pit" (5-6). By implying that no longer working for whites and rejecting the church are synonymous, the persona is also implying that being a part of a Christian church is the same as working menial jobs for whites: racially digressive and counter-productive.

While the religious poetry during the postbellum period was sparse, the poetry that was written ranged from a reiteration of old ideas to the establishment of new ones. The poetry of Fenton Johnson in particular paved the way for Harlem Renaissance poets, such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.

Poets of the Harlem Renaissance: 1915 – 1940

“I an’t a Christian like you, Eliza;
 my heart’s full of bitterness; I can’t trust in God.
 Why does he let things be so?” – *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

After World War I, the North seemed to be a haven in which blacks had endless opportunities, and racial problems did not exist. Because of this idyllic image of Northern cities, particularly New York, many blacks migrated there. As Claude Brown, the author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, says “These migrants were told that unlimited opportunities for prosperity existed in New York and that there was [sic] no ‘color problems’ there [. . .] To them, this was the ‘promised land’ that Mammy had been singing about in the cotton fields for many years” (7). In many ways, the post-World War I North appeared to represent the justice that slave poets like George Moses Horton and James M. Whitfield had been praying for in their poetry. Brown concedes: “So, they came, from all parts of the South, like all the black chilun o’ God following the sound of Gabriel’s horn on the long-overdue Judgment Day” (7). The term “New Negro” was coined, to refer specifically to those blacks that found success and prosperity in the North.

Despite the idyllic image many Southern blacks had envisioned, the North did not provide as much opportunity as anticipated. Randall Woods and Willard Gatewood say: “The term ‘New Negro’ [. . .] was applicable to a relatively small percentage of the nation’s African-American population” (724). Unfortunately, not many blacks had their “American dream” realized in the North. For many, life in the North merely provided different circumstances of injustice. The plight of the bitter, unemployed urbanite often paralleled that of the indebted, uneducated sharecropper. Having acknowledged the fact that the North was not a “paradise,” it is important to note that the North did provide the

home for many black artists and intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s. This emergence of black artists was particularly prominent in a small area in upper Manhattan known as Harlem. This black artistic movement took place between the end of the first World War and the beginning of the second, and has come to be known as the “Harlem Renaissance.” According to Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay, however, “[. . .] it is important to remember that what took place in New York City was in many respects a heightened version of the unusual cultural productivity taking place elsewhere in the United States, especially in the major cities of the North”(929). Yet, it is only fair to recognize that a disproportionate amount of the “unusual cultural productivity” took place in Harlem itself

The Harlem Renaissance was a time in which many blacks excelled creatively and rightfully secured themselves a place in America’s cultural history. Gates and Nellie McKay say, “Unquestionably, at least where the arts [. . .] are concerned, these years [of the Harlem Renaissance] marked an especially brilliant movement in the history of blacks in America” (929). Not only did the artists, especially the writers, fight racial injustice by barging through racial barriers and freely producing uncensored works, but they also protested racial injustice directly through the content of their pieces. Gates and Nellie McKay conclude:

Expressed in various ways, the creativity of black Americans undoubtedly came from a common source—the irrepressible impulse of blacks to create boldly expressive art of high quality as a primary response to their social conditions, as an affirmation of their dignity and humanity in face of poverty and racism. (929)

The Harlem Renaissance was a movement that both accepted and diverged from white

culture to form art that was true to the roots of black American life and American life in general. Randall Woods and Willard Gatewood assert that,

By accepting black culture and blending it with white culture in the Negro world, the [Harlem] Renaissance literati and artists contributed significantly to a separate culture that was neither wholly black nor wholly white, but a combination of the two—a distinctive African-American culture. (724)

According to Cary D. Wintz, by the late 1920s many blacks began feeling the necessity of distinguishing themselves and “developing attitudes of self-help and racial pride”(31). On this note, Wintz goes on to say that “Faced with declining support from even liberal whites, blacks banded together in separate organizations to advance their cause” (31). By doing so, blacks were fitting into American society, without completely embracing white America’s culture as their own.

However, just as Harlem Renaissance artists and black separatists helped establish a “distinctive” culture, many blacks felt more secure integrating themselves into American culture. Wintz asserts that, “[. . .] large numbers of black Americans had [. . .] assimilated to American middle-class values” (31). While establishing a distinctive African-American community, the Harlem Renaissance nonetheless acknowledged and addressed this conflict within the black community. Specifically, many blacks assimilated by continuing to accept Christianity, as did their ancestors, and the blacks that did not assimilate oftentimes began to question, if not reject, Christianity all together.

This conflict of loyalties, for lack of a better term, is especially prevalent in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. There were five poets in particular whose poetry depicted Christianity from the standpoints of both extremes: Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jean

Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Angelina Weld Grimké.

Claude McKay, a Catholic convert, sought both acceptance into the white community and Christianity itself, because he felt unaccepted in the black American community as a native West Indian. Wayne F. Cooper notes, “[. . .] after failing miserably to find any secure place for himself with the American Negro community, McKay was more than ready for the helping hand of young Catholic idealists [. . .]. If he could not seek refuge in the human community, he soon determined to seek it within the community of God” (352). In McKay’s sonnet “Baptism,” for example, the persona anticipates his baptism to be an event that will help him become stronger and better in general: “I will come out, back to your world of tears, / A stronger soul within a finer frame” (13-14). The world of tears to which McKay refers is that of white America. However, because of McKay’s personal rejection by the black community, it is possible that he is referring to America in general. Also, by assuming that he will become a “stronger soul” through his initiation into Christianity, the persona suggests that Christianity will help him fight off troubles of the world.

This particular persona is similar to the optimistic and passive personae of Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon’s antebellum poetry discussed earlier. This similarity with slave poets may come from the fact that, like Wheatley and Hammon, McKay has not yet established a distinct identity of his own in America and thus feels the need to integrate himself into the predominant culture. Further, this poem exemplifies a desire to assimilate into white America through a traditional poetic form used by generations of white poets: the sonnet. McKay is noted for his frequent use of the sonnet form, which contrasts significantly with the more modernist forms of his contemporaries.

McKay's sonnet "America" further illustrates a need to assimilate into America.

In line 7 of this poem, the persona says, "Her [America's] bigness sweeps me like a flood." The use of the word "flood" conveys a negative reception by America and implies that his assimilation into the country has been difficult. Similarly the poem "Heritage" by Countee Cullen, a well-educated American-born Harlem Renaissance scholar and poet, directly deals with the inner conflicts between two worlds and also uses the word "flood" negatively to refer to assimilation:

All day long and all night through,
One thing only must I do:
Quench my pride and cool my blood,
Lest I perish in the flood. (117-120)

Earlier in "Heritage," Cullen uses the word "perish" (20) to imply a symbolic death caused by the loss of one's identity. Despite their kindred acknowledgement of the difficulties in assimilating, Cullen and McKay hold different personal beliefs and use different poetic devices and subjects. While McKay desires assimilation and Christianity, Cullen is far less willing to accept either. Although Cullen is not known for strong religious ties, he does face the difficulties of living as a black man struggling to find his place in America. Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon say,

"[. . .] Countee Cullen provides an excellent illustration of what W.E.B. Du Bois meant by the 'double consciousness' that so often burdens the Black man in America—the consciousness of being both an American and a black man" (529). The fact that Cullen was the son in law of Du Bois himself cannot be overlooked as an influencing factor in his poetry and personal beliefs. According to Alan R. Shucard, Cullen himself has been quoted saying, "I find that I am actuated by a strong sense of racial consciousness [. . . .]"

it colors my writing" (23).

In "Heritage," the opening line is "What is Africa to me?," which denotes the persona's feelings of lost identity. Also, the persona further expresses a loss of identity, but this time he directly associates the loss with Christianity: "My conversion came high-priced; / I belong to Jesus Christ" (89-90). Considering the context of the poem, "high-priced" is used negatively to mean that the persona paid more than he would have liked personally when he converted. Because the persona feels an attachment, or inherited allegiance, to Christianity, it is apparent that he was raised to believe in its theologies. Thus, the loss of identity is really an inability to find his true identity. The persona is caught between the religion he was taught and that of his African ancestors: "Lamb of God, although I speak, / With my mouth, thus in my heart / Do I play a double part" (96-98). The words "double part" imply the forced duality of the persona's life; he is caught between accepting something he does not believe in, and believing in something he does not know. Eventually, the persona identifies the root of his inability to embrace Christianity: "Wishing He I served were black, / Thinking then it would not lack / Precedent of pain to guide it" (101-103). Essentially, the persona's covert rejection of Christianity stems from his disconnection from a white God. The persona boldly suggests that a black God would be better able to guide him spiritually because that God would understand that pain he goes through as a black man.

Similarly, Jean Toomer, a very prominent Harlem Renaissance writer and scholar, dismisses the legitimacy of a white Christian God in his poem "Conversion":

African Guardian of Souls,
Drunk with rum,
Feasting on strange cassava,

Yielding to new words [...]

Of a white-faced sardonic god —. (1-5)

First, by not capitalizing the “G” in the word “god,” the persona implies a lack of respect for the “white-faced” Christian God. J. Martin Favor agrees, going on to say that “[. . .] Toomer does not ever grant that religion the courtesy of a god with a capital G. Certainly it is the whiteness of the god that, in some respects, necessitates the speaker’s refusal of it” (68). Further, the words “strange” and “new” suggest that the concept of a white Christian God is inherently alien to blacks.

Also, just as Cullen’s persona in “Heritage” feels as though a white God cannot guide him, the persona of Langston Hughes, the most renowned writer of the Harlem Renaissance, in the poem “Song for a Dark Girl,” states explicitly that a white God cannot help him:

Way Down South in Dixie

(Bruised body high in air)

I asked the white Lord Jesus

What was the use of prayer. (5-8)

This idea that God can no longer offer help to blacks is a sharp contrast to the views of even the most cynical of slave poets, such as George Moses Horton, who had not yet given up hope in a Christian God. The futility in seeking God’s help is further evidenced by the persona in the poem, “The Black Finger,” by Angelina Weld Grimké, a Harlem Renaissance writer best known for her works prior to the Renaissance period, in which the persona indirectly questions why a black person would look to God for help: “Why, beautiful still finger, are you black? / And why are you pointing upwards?” (9-10).

Upwards, or heavenwards, suggests in the direction of God. The fact that the persona

asks why the finger is pointing in that direction implies that he believes looking to God for help is to no effect. Considering Grimké's interracial heritage, it is likely that she faced personal inner conflict regarding her identity. Because her family practiced Christianity, the God she hints at in her poem is the white God of Christianity.

Also, the persona's questioning of why the finger is black may also reflect Grimké's confusion in discerning her true identity.

For blacks who began to reject the white God of America as a legitimate authority, there grew a need to identify with a god that can better guide black people: the god, or gods, of their African ancestors. In Cullen's "Heritage," the persona goes beyond merely rejecting Christianity; he goes on to embrace the religions of his forefathers. However, initially the persona tries to fight his inner yearning to accept the religions of his African ancestors:

[...] I, who always hear,
 Though I cram against my ear
 Both my thumbs, and keep them there,
 Great drums throbbing through the air. (19-22)

The reference to drums in line 22 directly relates to the tribal cultures of West Africa, in which drums were used for communication and worship. By stopping up his ears, Cullen's persona is obviously trying to ignore his desire to seek the religion and culture of his ancestors and continue to assimilate into white, Christian culture.

However, his will is bending:
 [...] the dark blood dammed within
 Like great pulsing tides of wine
 That I fear, must burst the fine

Channels of the chafing net

Where the surge and foam and fret. (26-30)

The word “dammed” is a play on words meant to suggest that by ignoring his ancient roots, the persona would essentially be damning himself. Also, in line 28, the persona of “Heritage” makes it clear that he cannot accept the false assimilated identity he has adopted any longer. Finally, although Cullen’s persona does not directly align himself with any particular African religion, he begins to associate the god he worships with the “Quaint, outlandish heathen gods” (85) his ancestors worshipped:

Lord, I fashion dark gods [. . .]

Daring even to give You

Dark despairing features [. . .]

Crowned with dark rebellious hair. (107-110)

The persona admits to seeking the religion of his ancestors by Africanizing the images of a white God. Further, the word “rebellious” has a double meaning, implying the persona’s fearless rebellion against the mainstream white Christian culture he no longer wishes to assimilate into.

Barksdale and Kinnamon argue that “the poem ‘Heritage,’ in which the poet tries to define the relationship to his African past and answer the question ‘What is Africa to me?’ reveals his involvement with racial roots to be somewhat confused. His conclusion is that in order to avoid being consumed by the fiery memories of his African racial past, one must ‘quench’ his pride and ‘cool’ his blood and try not to remember the beat of the ‘Great drums throbbing through the air’” (529). However, because the poem literally concludes with a challenge to the white God’s legitimacy in a black man’s life, the persona has obviously decided not to assimilate.

Another example of the desire to connect with one's African religious past is found in Hughes' "Dream Variations," in which the persona expresses a longing for African worship and familiarity:

To fling my arms wide
 In some place of the sun,
 To whirl and to dance
 Till the white day is done.
 Then rest at cool evening
 Beneath a tall tree
 While night comes on gently,
 Dark like me –
 That is my dream! (1-9)

By anticipating the end of the "white" day, the persona indirectly connotes a desire to separate from white culture. Also, by appreciating the night that, like the persona, is dark, he alludes to a need for the familiarity of dark skin that Africa provides. Further, the reference to dancing in line 3 suggests a wish to connect to African religions, which often incorporate dance in worship. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., agree, going on to say: "[. . .] there were many forms of the African dance. Some were for recreational or social purposes, while others served ritualistic or religious functions. Africans regarded both music forms and dance as integral parts of their culture" (23).

The use of African religious imagery in both Cullen's "Heritage" and Hughes' "Dream Variations" illustrates that the personae wanted more than to simply break free from mainstream white culture; instead, they wanted to go back to their African roots.

The poets of the Harlem Renaissance, unlike their antebellum counterparts, did

not feel a need to seek acceptance and safety by assimilating into mainstream white culture. On the contrary, their overwhelming, if not unanimous, desire was to break away from white American culture. In their respective efforts to find a new, distinct identity, they often looked to Africa for a model culture and religion to follow.

Conclusion

Neither the slave poets nor the poets of the Harlem Renaissance were typical members of the African-American community; poets from both time periods were far better educated than most other blacks, and Americans of all races, during their respective eras. Yet their poetry can be seen as reflecting the desires of less educated blacks to find identity and meaning in their lives.

Phillis Wheatley is the quintessential representation of antebellum poets, and her poetry represents the overwhelming acceptance of Christianity exhibited among slaves. An important passage from Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" epitomizes the pro-assimilation/conformity slave values:

‘Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, and there's a Saviour, too;
Once redemption I neither sought nor knew. (1-4)

The slaves needed to gain an identity, and because of their precarious situation in American society, white culture seemed most appropriate; thus the "white" religion was often embraced, becoming the most important connection between whites and blacks. Postbellum period poets like James Weldon Johnson were reiterating ideas of assimilation. However, more cynical poets like Fenton Johnson were more inclined to avoid assimilation.

Similarly, while Harlem Renaissance writers were not typical in their level of education and cultural opportunities, they understood the widespread need of many blacks to search for their identity. Countee Cullen, like Wheatley, played the role of the authoritative representative of black sentiment for the time. The following passage from Cullen's "Heritage" exemplifies the need to break from Christianity in order for the persona to find a separate identity:

Must my heart grow sick and falter,
 Wishing He I served were black,
 Thinking then it would not lack
 Precedent of pain to guide it,
 Let who would or might deride it;
 Surely then this flesh would know
 Yours had borne a kindred woe. (100-106)

Knowing that Christianity had been the most significant bridge to white American culture, the Harlem Renaissance poets accurately illustrated the desire by many blacks, particularly Northern urbanites, to break away from that religion and find identity in their African past. The poets of the Harlem Renaissance laid the foundation for more radical anti-assimilationist movements, as well as the Black arts movement in the 1960s.

The postbellum poets bridged the gap between the assimilationist slave poets, and the revolutionary non-conformist writers of the Harlem Renaissance. For both antebellum poets and Harlem Renaissance poets, the respective acceptance and rejection of Christianity is used as a means to establish an identity for one, in the mainstream American culture, and for the other, out of it; Christianity, though by different means, played a definitive role for both periods' distinct purposes.

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