The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance
Author(s): Jon Michael Spencer
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The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance

Scholars of African American religion have heard next to nothing about the Harlem (or New Negro) Renaissance in the context of discourse on the black church. The era, at least since the publication of Nathan Huggins's 1971 historical study Harlem Renaissance, has been claimed by literary scholars. The immense attention they have given to the literary output during this historical epoch of the 1920s and beyond has left the impression that, whatever else was going on, religion was not central to the artistic and intellectual burgeoning of that time.

I wish to argue that there was also an institutionalization of the Renaissance in the black church and that this institutionalization came in the form of the social gospel movement, a movement of social Christianity (as opposed to individual, evangelical Christianity) which commenced among white Protestants in the North around 1880 and spread to the black church (specifically elite black churches) around 1895. Reverdy C. Ransom, himself a social gospeler, seems to have understood this, as his 1923 poem "The New Negro" makes clear. Slavery and oppression, wrote the black bishop, made the old Negro stronger, chiseled him to form, so that he could bear "rich gifts to science, religion, poetry and song." In its entirety, the poem reads:

HE IS NEW, he is old as the forests primeval.
Stark in their nakedness of limb,
His forebears roamed the jungle and led the chase.
Crystalized by the heat of Oriental suns,
God made him a rock of undecaying power,
To become at last the nation's corner stone.
Rough hewn from the jungle and the desert's sands,
Slavery was the chisel that fashioned him to form,
And gave him all the arts and sciences had won.
The lyncher, mob, and stake have been his emery wheel.
TO MAKE A POLISHED MAN of strength and power.
In him, the latest birth of freedom,
God hath again made all things new.
Europe and Asia with ebbing tides recede,
America's unfinished arch of freedom waits,
Till he, the corner stone of strength,
Is lifted into place and power.
Behold him! dauntless and unafraid he stands.
He comes with laden arms,
Bearing rich gifts to science, religion, poetry and song.
Labor and capital through him shall find
The equal heritage of common brotherhood,
And statesmanship shall keep the stewardship
Of justice with equal rights and privileges for all.
HE KNOWS HIS PLACE to keep it
As a sacred trust and heritage for all.
To wear God's image in the ranks of men
And walk as princes of the royal blood divine,
ON EQUAL FOOTING everywhere with all mankind.
With ever-fading color on these shores,
The Oriental sunshine in his blood
Shall give the warming touch of brotherhood

Jon Michael Spencer is the Tyler and Alice Haynes Professor of American Studies and Professor of Music at the University of Richmond. He is the author of more than ten books on African American music and culture, including Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion (1990), Black Hymnody (1992), Blues and Evil (1993), Sing a New Song: Liberating Black Hymnody (1995), and The Rhythms of Black Folks: Race, Religion, and Pan-Africanism (1995).
And love, to all the fused races in our land,
He is the last reserve of God on earth,
Who, in the godly fellowship of love,
Will rule the world with peace. (12)

That the social gospel in the black church should be included in the group of significant events that came together in the mid-1890s and burgeoned in the 1920s during the Harlem Renaissance is further suggested by the Harmon awards, which were given not only to talented blacks in the arts, letters, and sciences, but also in religion. In 1928, the same year James Weldon Johnson won the Harmon award in literature, two pastors won it in the area of religion—in recognition of their efforts to develop the church into an entity of social and community service (Saul 46-47). Two years later, in 1930, a Harmon award was given to, among other intellectuals in the arts and letters, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., for religious service (“Six” 1-2).

Had Harry V. Richardson, the early twentieth-century black scholar who wrote on the black church, taken a cue from the Harmon awards, or at least from Ransom’s poem “The New Negro” (which he should have been familiar with), he might have brought more insight to his article of 1933 in Opportunity, “The New Negro and Religion.” But Richardson failed to recognize that the New Negro (the Harlem Renaissance man and woman) had become institutionalized in the black church in the form of social gospel ministry. Instead, Richardson sarcastically argued that most New Negroes were atheists devoid of spiritual interests, due in part to their belief that the church had failed to keep abreast of their intellectual development (42, 44).

There were Renaissance artists and intellectuals who were, or perhaps seemed to be, professed atheists—novelist Nella Larsen, journalist J. A. Rogers, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson, to name a few. Larsen said outright that she did not believe in religion and churches (Berlack 16), and Rogers opined in a review of the musical comedy The Green Pastures that “the story of Jehovah creating the earth and man we now realize belongs to the infancy of our civilization despite the rivers of blood that exploiting tyrants and their henchmen, the theologians, split for centuries in an effort to clamp down that doctrine on the human brain. We now know that it is on a level with the belief that babies are brought by storks” (8). Alain Locke was so disdainful of Christianity in the West that he said, “When I think of the warped and narrow beliefs and teachings Christianity rammed down our Negro throats, I really feel like burning the churches” (Letter to Mason, 9 Sep. 1932). Hughes seemed to reject Christianity in his dramatic monologue “Good-bye Christ,” a piece that caused Kelly Miller to suggest that Hughes was a radical, atheistic Negro (8). Hurston, in her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road, uttered words of seeming sacrilege about prayer:

...I do not pretend to read God’s mind. If He has a plan of the universe worked out to the smallest detail, it would be folly for me to presume to get down on my knees and attempt to revise it... So I do not pray. I accept the means at my disposal for working out my destiny... I have been given a mind and will-power for that very purpose... Prayer seems to me a cry of weakness, and an attempt to avoid, by trickery, the rules of the game as laid down. (278)

Johnson, in The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, portrays a protagonist who is critical of the Bible from the time he begins reading it, at the young age of eleven:

I became interested in the life of Christ, but became impatient and disappointed when I found that, notwithstanding the great power he possessed, he did not make use of it when, in my judgment, he most needed to do so. And so my first general impression of the Bible was what my later impression has been of a number of modern books, that the authors put their best work in the first part, and grew either
exhausted or careless toward the end.

(24-25)

The consequence of this impression of the Bible by Johnson's protagonist is his "permanent dislike for all kinds of theology" (25).

Indeed, Johnson himself rejected the notion of a personal God, identifying himself as an agnostic as early as his college years at Atlanta University (Along 30). He also believed human beings were blind victims of institutional religion, which was but a cruel mechanism of human manipulation (see Thirkield). Johnson was evidently one of the "younger men" spoken of in an article of 1930 which he clipped and pasted into his scrapbook:

A large group of younger men, college men, authors, doctors, intellectuals, denounce the church as a foe to racial progress.

They say that the pittances of the poor go into extravagantly expensive church buildings; that the ministers' energies are divided between exhorting their parishioners to help pay off the church debt, raking over the dry bones of dead theological controversy, and lulling the Negroes into indifference to their miserable economic situation by promises of eternal happiness to come. They say, these younger men, that the energy, time and money which Negroes spend in their churches should be devoted to a constructive effort to meet the problems of this world. (Smith n.p.)

This article of 1930 was in fact the basis of the mood and language in Johnson's comments on the black church in his 1934 book Negro Americans, What Now? "First of all," writes Johnson, "the church together with the race as a whole must do a certain amount of clearing away in the religious field. We must stamp out as far as we can the bootleggers of religion, those parasites who, whenever they can get together a sufficient number of poor, hard-working women, will . . . peddle a spurious brand of Christianity at a relatively exorbitant price" (21). Johnson continues: "The church must as nearly as it can abolish hypnotic religion, that religion which excites visions of the delights of life in the world to come, while it gives us no insight into the conditions we encounter in the world in which we now live. There is still to be found in the Negro church too much obsolete doctrine" (23).

But while such Renaissance artists and intellectuals as Larsen, Rogers, Locke, Hughes, Hurston, and Johnson may have convinced Richardson that the New Negro was largely atheistic, Richardson could not have accused all Renaissance Negroes of atheism. Harry T. Burleigh, a New Negro in the musical field, remained a lifelong Episcopalian as well as a soloist in the choir of St. George Episcopal Church for fifty-two years. Composer and educator R. Nathaniel Dett was a longtime Presbyterian whose Hampton Institute choir performed at black churches throughout the country, including Harlem's Metropolitan Baptist Church the evening before the Hampton choir set sail for its European tour of 1930. Soprano concert artist Dorothy Maynor was raised a member of her father's African Methodist Episcopal church in the Norfolk, Virginia, area, and she later married a minister, Shelby Rooks, who became the pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church in Harlem. After she retired from the concert stage in 1963, Maynor became the choir director at St. James. Composer William Grant Still, raised in the church by his mother, seems to have been converted anew in 1930 while going through an emotionally turbulent time in his life—unemployed due to the Depression and involved in a deteriorating relationship with his first wife. All of these artists, albeit members of the elitist class, drew from the religious culture maintained by blacks of less privilege who attended churches of a lower socioeconomic level, including the storefront churches which often comprised new arrivals from the South via the Great Migration.

Moreover, black Renaissance artists such as Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Carter G. Woodson, and W. E. B. Du Bois occasionally spoke at
black churches. At least once Locke was of service to the Lombard Street Central Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, under William Lloyd Imes, before Imes became the pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church in Harlem (Imes). Johnson was one of the keynote speakers at the first annual conference on "Religion among Young People" at St. Philip's in 1928 ("Young" 3). Woodson appeared at St. James on a Sunday afternoon in 1926 under the auspices of the organization he founded, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History ("Many" 9). Du Bois gave a talk on the race problem one Sunday at St. Mark's Methodist Episcopal Church in 1930 ("Du Bois Asserts" 3).

As is often the case with artists and intellectuals who appear to be (or even claim to be) atheists, many in reality are not. Here I am speaking about individuals' fundamental intellectual dispositions and not the less important fact that they turned to the folk culture of the black church—such as the spirituals and the preaching—for material with which to create artistically. For instance, Hurston implied that it was prayer, not God, in which she lacked belief (278), and Hughes explained that he wrote "Good-bye Christ" simply to shock Christians, black and white, into recognizing the shortcomings of the church with regard to addressing the condition of the poor and oppressed of the world, particularly the poor and oppressed blacks of the American South ("Hughes" n.p.). Neither was James Weldon Johnson anti-Christian, a rebel against his upbringing in the Methodist Episcopal Church or against his father who became a minister when he was young. At the request of Henry Smith Leiper, executive secretary of the American branch of the Universal Christian Council, William Lloyd Imes (pastor of St. James) implored Johnson to accept the invitation to be a member of the American Advisory Committee of the Universal Christian Council, an organization that was part of the Federal Council of the Church of Christ in America (Leiper; Imes). Johnson accepted the offer to represent the black community on this committee, whose task was to examine the relationship among church, state, and society (Leiper), and in 1936 served on this committee of Christians alongside such distinguished churchmen as Henry Sloane Coffin and Harry Emerson Fosdick. The following year Johnson accepted the invitation of Howard Thurman, the distinguished dean of Howard University's chapel, to speak at a vesper service (Thurman).

As for Johnson's rejection of a personal God and the claim that he lived forty years outside the atmosphere of religion, family friend Wilber Thirkield denied any suggestion that Johnson was Godless. He said to Johnson, "Would not music also have died in you if you had not kept your heart and mind attuned to noble strains of music?"—by which he meant the noble strains of divine music (Thirkield). Thirkield was correct: It was by no means the case that Johnson was an atheist—not when his hymn "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and the poems comprising God's Trombones reveal his heart and mind to be so attuned with the spiritual. Indeed, Johnson's respect for the black church ran deep, like his respect for black folk song. Just as he felt that black folk song could be the basis for higher forms of art befitting the need of blacks to acquire culture-citizenship in America, so did he feel the black church could be the most effective medium for the pursuit of equal rights for blacks (Johnson, Negro 20). For that reason, Johnson petitioned
the black church to nurture the growth of an educated black ministry that would engage in an "applied Christianity" (23, 52).

Locke was not anti-Christian either, but like Johnson regarded the institution as corrupt. He felt that the church was at its best in the East but that it began to decline as soon as it was transplanted to the West (Locke to Mason, 20 July 1934). In particular, Locke, like Johnson, was opposed to religion being an "opiate" that retards the human quest for social justice. "The salvation we have sought after as individuals in an after-life and another sphere must be striven for as the practical peace and unity of the human family here in this," wrote Locke in an unpublished piece that may have been the talk he delivered at some of his church engagements. "In some very vital respects God will be rediscovered to our age if we succeed in discovering the common denominator of humanity and living in terms of it and valuing all things in accordance with it." Locke went on to say that reconciliation between the world's racial and national factions could not occur without a revolution within the human soul:

If the world had believingly understood the full significance of Him who taught it to pray and hope "Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven" who also said "In my Father's house are many mansions," already we should be further toward the realization of this great millennial vision. The word of God is still insistent, and more emphatic as the human redemption delays and becomes more crucial. (Untitled)

The last passage reads as though Locke were drawing directly from "The Social Meaning of the Lord's Prayer," the introduction to Walter Rauschenbusch's *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Gospel* (1910). Locke owned a copy of the famous little book by the theological father of the social gospel, for in April 1928 he was given one by Rauschenbusch's widow Pauline, who inscribed the words: "To Dr. Alain Locke in Remembrance of the author and their common task." Like Walter Rauschenbusch, Locke believed the words and teachings of Christ had been falsified and misused, so that Christians at best only knew some of the words Christ is reported to have said (Locke to Mason, 28 Aug. 1933). Like such black churchmen as Reverdy Ransom, who had adapted the social gospel theology to the needs of the black church, Locke viewed "Social Christianity," as he termed it, as a possible rubric under which a new and more just social order could be worked out to benefit blacks, the poor, and women (Locke to Calvin). Locke also sounded like the theologians of the social gospel, with their anthropological theology, when, upon a ship tour of 1934 that took him through southern Europe, the Middle East, northern Africa (Egypt), and Russia, he saw in Istanbul (historic Constantinople) a recent discovery of original Christian frescoes and mosaics. He said the best fresco of Mary and Jesus was but a human idealization of mother and son (Locke to Mason, 20 July 1934).

Because the connection between the Harlem Renaissance and the black church was not dependent upon the religious faith of particular Renaissance artists and intellectuals, it does not matter that Claude McKay considered himself to be a "pagan" whose work he himself felt was absent of expressions of Christian morality (McKay). Neither does the connection between the Renaissance and the black church need to be argued on the basis that particular Renaissance artists and intellectuals sometimes attended or performed and lectured in black churches, or by the fact that the folk culture of the black church was used as a thematic resource by Renaissance artists. The point is that the black churches that practiced the social gospel themselves comprised a component of the Renaissance, a component containing its own corpus of
intellectuals—namely, an educated and sophisticated black clergy. Intellectuals and elitists they were, just like the men who gave theoretical meaning and momentum to the Renaissance. Thus, it is no coincidence that James Weldon Johnson sent a complimentary copy of God’s Trombones to social gospel ministers Reverdy Ransom and Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., and not to any storefront preachers whose “hypnotic religion” represented the Old Negro (Ransom to Johnson; Powell).

Among the oldest and most prominent of the Harlem churches that practiced the social gospel under the leadership of educated and progressive pastors were the Abyssinian Baptist Church, St. Philip’s Protestant Episcopal Church, and St. James Presbyterian Church. Under the pastorate of Rev. Hutchins C. Bishop, St. Philip’s became the largest black congregation in the Protestant Episcopal denomination and the wealthiest of all black churches in the country. The church owned a substantial amount of property in Harlem, including apartment buildings extending a full block on 135th Street. Its financial capacity was due to the fact that more New Negroes of educational attainment and financial means were members there than at any other black church in the city.

Of the distinguished black churches to relocate to Harlem from Manhattan, the first was the Abyssinian Baptist Church, touted as the largest and wealthiest black Baptist church in the country. It moved to Harlem in 1908 under Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., who had assumed the pastorate that year. Powell soon began to establish himself as a practitioner of the social gospel. His church maintained a home for the elderly and a social center called the Community House. During the summers the Community House, which housed evening training schools for religious teachers and Red Cross nurses, also hosted the largest youth Vacation Bible School in the city (“Out of Debt” 14).

Although Rev. W. W. Brown, pastor of the Metropolitan Baptist Church, was not so well-known as Powell, he was acknowledged for his involvement in Harlem’s economic concerns. Brown repeatedly made “Buy property” the theme of his sermons, to the extent that buying property became a fever among blacks that climaxed around 1921 (Johnson, “Harlem” 306).

The church music that seemed to go hand-in-hand with the progressive Protestantism of the black social gospel movement was not the traditional hymns of evangelical Christianity or even the new hymns of social Christianity written by the new corpus of white social gospel hymnists, but the arranged spirituals of such Renaissance composers as R. Nathaniel Dett. That the arranged spirituals were a principal musical corpus for the educated and sophisticated ministry of the black social gospel was evidenced at the Atlanta church of the well-respected social gospeler Henry Hugh Proctor. As part of the social ministry of his First Congregational Church, Proctor founded the Atlanta Colored Music Festival Association in 1910 (after 1915, the Georgia Music Festival Association), which annually brought to Atlanta such well-known black performers as Harry T. Burleigh, Roland Hayes, John W. Work, Clarence Cameron White, Carl Diton, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Thus, it is no surprise that it was at a social gospel church, Metropolitan Baptist Church in Harlem, that the Hampton Institute choir performed its arranged spirituals the night before it sailed for Europe (Phenix). To a full house the choir sang several of Dett’s arrangements, including “Listen to the Lambs,” “No More Auction Block For Me,” and “Don’t Weep No More, Mary.” Among the listeners sharing in the applause at Metropolitan that night was Burleigh, who appeared to be impressed by the quality of Dett’s work (Peabody).

When the Great Depression hit in 1929, the arranged spirituals were still being sung in the progressive black
churches, as evidenced by the Hampton choir’s concert at Metropolitan Baptist Church when on its way to Europe in 1930. But, more importantly, all of those arranged spirituals with social meanings paid off when the Renaissance men of the social gospel positioned their churches to help Harlem’s residents contend with the economic crisis when it came crashing down. In September 1930, St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal Church hosted a mass meeting in order to determine ways of creating jobs, and within a couple of months a centralized movement, the Harlem Co-operating Committee on Relief and Employment, had been organized under the direction of Rev. Shelton Hale Bishop (“Salvation”) 3. Bishop, the assistant pastor of St. Philip’s Church, was the pastor’s son, and under his youthful leadership the Committee solicited clothing, food supplies, and monetary contributions from Harlem’s churches for immediate relief of families in the community. The Abyssinian Baptist Church, given its size and prominence, ran its own relief bureau, headed by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who coordinated the church’s work with that of the larger committee under Rev. Bishop.

If I am correct that there was an institutionalization of the Harlem Renaissance in the form of the social gospel movement, then it will be necessary for scholars of the black church to begin to examine that historical epoch, perhaps for the first time. To do otherwise is to allow scholars in other disciplines to define the perimeters of American epochs and movements and to exclude the consideration of religion based on their own secular hermeneutics.


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