

UNVEILING CHRISTIAN MOTIFS IN SELECT WRITERS OF  
HARLEM RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

A Thesis

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by

Joycelyn Laverne Collins

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## ABSTRACT

Prior to the early 1900s, much of the artistic expression of African American writers and artists was strongly steeped in a Christian tradition. With the Harlem Renaissance (roughly 1917-1934), the paradigm shifted to some degree.

An examination of several books and articles written during and about the Harlem Renaissance revealed that very few emphasized religion as a major theme of influence on Renaissance artists. This would suggest that African American intelligentsia in the first three decades of the twentieth century were free of the strong ties to church and Christianity that had been a lifeline to so many for so long. However, this writer suggests that, as part of an African American community deeply rooted in Christianity, writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance period must have had some roots in and expression of that same experience.

The major focus of this research, therefore, is to discover and document the extent to which Christianity influenced the Harlem Renaissance.

The research is intended to answer the following questions concerning the relationship of Christianity to the Harlem Renaissance:

1. What was the historical and religious context of the Harlem Renaissance?
2. To what extent did Christianity influence the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance?
3. Did the tone of their artistry change greatly from the previous century? If so, what were the catalysts?
4. Three notable pre-twentieth-century African American writers apparently had been able to come to terms with Christianity. Were the Renaissance artists able to do it? Why or why not?
5. What made their views different?

6. What personal experiences did the Renaissance artists have with Christianity?

7. How was this Christian influence manifested in the literature?

Methods used to accomplish this discovery will include library research covering historical studies of Christianity and literature in the African American community from the 1700s into the 1930s, autobiographical and biographical research of the Harlem Renaissance artists, and an analysis of selected works, concentrating on the poetry.

The study will include a look at Christianity in the African American community at large, as well as other factors. Intellectual and literary pursuits during the early decades of the twentieth century were paralleled by growth and diversity in the African American church. It is the consciousness that gave impetus to both these movements that this writer will explore. This portion of the paper will address the views of important early twentieth century figures as well as factors that influenced the urban religious landscape.

The next portion of the paper will highlight the individual Christian background and experiences of some of the artists with whose works the Renaissance is most closely identified. This study will address the artists' own perspectives, as told in their autobiographies and biographies.

This study will include an overview of the works of select writers of the Harlem Renaissance period and provide an analysis of works relevant to this thesis. The discussion will focus on the underlying expression of certain themes derived from Christian Scripture, including the following:

- God's relation to humans—Jesus as Savior, deliverer, judge, source of hope
- Theme of equality (one God, one blood, one Spirit; no respect of persons)
- Celebration of African beauty/self as created by God and made in His image

- Christianity interwoven in the fabric of everyday life.

This portion of the paper also will address the works of some artists who, rather than embracing Christianity, may have used it in their works as a point of departure, highlighting its challenges and shortcomings.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Joycelyn L. Collins was born in Valentines, Virginia, the fourth of twelve children born to Harvey and Mary Collins. She graduated as the first Black valedictorian of Brunswick Senior High School in Lawrenceville, Virginia, and subsequently entered the University of Virginia in 1970 as part of its first contingent of female and Black first-year students. Coming from a small southern town, Joycelyn was delighted to find that the university offered academic courses on Black folks! She proceeded to pursue a double major at the University of Virginia, earning a B.A. in Communications and a B.A. in Afro-American Studies.

Upon leaving Virginia, Joycelyn entered the Master of Professional Studies program at Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center, concentrating in African American literature. She successfully completed the coursework for the degree, but left to begin her family before writing her thesis.

After working in various communications positions in private industry for over twenty-five years, Joycelyn felt the need to finish what she had started so many years ago. Inspired by her pastor through a message simply entitled "Finish," Joycelyn contacted the Cornell University Graduate School and began the process of completing her degree.

The process has been arduous, yet rewarding for Joycelyn. She experienced the grace and favor of God in a very special way. Through this accomplishment, she hopes that her seven children will realize that it is never too late to change or to succeed.

This thesis is dedicated to my entire family—those gone before, those here now, and those yet to come.

Islam, Insana, Soiyete, Jossame, Ashte, Umer, Qualamiya  
I pray that you will always be “watchmen on the wall.”

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose

The major focus of this thesis is to examine and document the ways in which Christianity influenced the period in African American history known as the Harlem Renaissance. Despite the paucity of literature directly addressing this relationship, this author suspects that the Christian experience of African Americans had a significant impact on the works produced during the Harlem Renaissance.

The research is intended to answer the following questions concerning the relationship of Christianity to the Harlem Renaissance.

1. What was the historical and religious context of the Harlem Renaissance?
2. To what extent and in what ways did Christianity influence the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance?
3. Did the tone of their artistry change greatly from the previous century? If so, what were the catalysts?
4. Notable pre-twentieth-century African American writers apparently had been able to come to terms with Christianity. Were the Renaissance artists able to do it? Why or why not?
5. What made their views different?
6. What personal experiences did the Renaissance artists have with Christianity?
7. How was this Christian influence manifested in the literature?

Definitions

The **Harlem Renaissance** is defined in this paper as the period of unprecedented expression by African Americans in the arts—music, literature, drama, and artwork—centered in Harlem, New York, and beginning roughly at the end of

World War I and extending into the early 1930s. The focus will be primarily, though not exclusively, on the literature of the period, especially the poetry.

**Christianity** is the religion stemming from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus Christ; belief in God as the Father Almighty and Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior who proclaimed to man the gospel of salvation; conformity to the Christian religion.<sup>1</sup>

**Doctrine** is something that is taught; a principle or position or the body of principles in a branch of knowledge or system of belief” (e.g., the creed, tenets, belief, dogma of a religion).

**Theology** is the study of religious faith, practice, and experience, especially the study of God and his relation to the world.

So the doctrine of Christianity is “what” is believed, while the theology is “how” it is believed and put into practice. It is important to note that several of the sources studied identify a clear distinction between the doctrine and the theology—between Christianity as it is recorded and taught in Western European history and Christianity as it has been practiced by Whites in America. For African Americans, the practice of Christianity has often involved the incorporation of distinct cultural behaviors that make the demonstration of their beliefs (theology) uniquely their own.

### **Literature Review**

An examination of many books and articles written during and about the Harlem Renaissance revealed that very few of them emphasized religion as a major theme of or influence on Renaissance artists. Therefore, to construct adequate parameters for this study, it was necessary to consider writings that present socio-historical, religious, and literary contexts of the Harlem Renaissance period.

Following is a description of some of the major perspectives and sources examined.

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<sup>1</sup> These three definitions are derived from *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Mass.:Merriam-Webster, Inc.), 1993.

## Social History and Analysis

*The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903, remains a landmark rendering of Black life in America at the turn of the last century. Written by the highly educated historian and sociologist William Edward Burghardt DuBois, this collection of essays does a marvelous job of portraying the sensitivity, ethos, and pathos of an entire sub-nation of a people. DuBois devotes several essays to analysis of the historical and social circumstances of African Americans, and the last third of the book concentrates on Black people's religious life and spiritual condition. In his introduction to the book, noted author Henry Louis Gates proposes that "no other text, save possibly the King James Bible, has had a more fundamental impact on the shaping of the Afro-American literary tradition."<sup>2</sup>

In addition, DuBois served for almost 25 years (1910-34) as editor of *The Crisis* magazine, literary journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This publication became a chief venue for introducing the writings of many Harlem Renaissance artists to the world. "Through the sheer force of his rhetorical skills, imagination, and intellectual authority, DuBois transformed the official organ of a political lobbying group into the major outlet for black political opinion and literature in the world."<sup>3</sup>

A second authoritative source detailing the history of African Americans is *From Slavery to Freedom*, written by John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. The account presented in this book begins with early Africa and extends well into the twentieth century. It provides a well-researched portrayal of Black life during slavery and Reconstruction, as well as valuable information concerning the Great Migration and the awakenings of the new culture of the 1920s. The book chronicles the

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*, by William E.B. DuBois (New York: Bantam Classis Edition, 1989), xiv.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

successes and failures of Black political and social organizations and the men that led them.

Darlene Hine, William Hine, and Stanley Harrold contribute one of the most comprehensive socio-historical studies ever presented on African Americans in their book *The African American Odyssey*. In more than 600 pages, this straightforward treatise tells the story of Africans from their early civilizations in Africa before they were brought to Western soil through the beginning of the new millennium. The authors concentrate on describing and analyzing the cause-and-effect relationships that contributed to every phase of the African American's history and status in this country.

Any study of African American life during the last century would be incomplete without a discussion of the phenomenon that was Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). In his compendium of Garvey's philosophy, Robert Hill presents Garvey's own voice, especially capturing his creed of African Fundamentalism written in 1925. The volume also includes Garvey's brief autobiography taken from articles contributed to the *Pittsburgh Courier*; dialogues from his magazine *The Black Man*; and lessons from his School of African Philosophy, summarizing his views on God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost; education; race; and a diversity of other topics. Garvey's philosophy had a profound effect on the Harlem Renaissance period, causing one historian quoted in the introduction to the volume to claim that "the New Negro is Garvey's own child, whose mother is the UNIA."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Hill and Barbara Bair, eds., *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), xv. William Ferris, quote from *Spokesman I*, No. 4 (March 1925), 4.

## Religious History and Analysis

In his comprehensive study on *The History of the Negro Church*, Carter G. Woodson highlights the role of the church in the education and socialization of African Americans. Woodson examines the origins of the Black church, its various missions, and its strengths, weaknesses, and problems. The book includes statistical analyses of churches and church membership by geographic region, and gives some insight to the role of migration in the stratification of the Black church.

Anne Pinn and Anthony Pinn, in the *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History*, give a realistic account of how enslaved Africans appropriated Christianity as their own. As illustrated in the section entitled the “Africanization of Christianity,” “Those enslaved Africans who sought to shape the Christian faith in ways that responded to their existential condition and spiritual needs developed what is known as the invisible institution.”<sup>5</sup> The authors go on to describe the evolution of the Black church from those early beginnings to the many movements and denominations that now comprise Christianity in the African American community. The book also includes a discussion of Black liberation theology.

*This Far by Faith*, authored by Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie, offers a narrative chronology of Black faith from the African slave trade through the end of the twentieth century. The book explores not only Christianity, but also all forms of religious faith practiced by African Americans throughout their history. Williams and Dixie detail the factors that produced men of faith such as Henry McNeal Turner and George Alexander McGuire. They also discuss movements within the historical Christian church as influenced by the times, and give reason to the many divergent theologies produced in the early 1900s.

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Pinn and Anthony Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002), 12.



Gayraud Wilmore, in his book *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, explores African American religious history with an eye to the social changes that it engendered on one hand or failed to produce on the other. He focuses his interpretation on the “radicalism with which I believe black religion has had a vacillating and paradoxical relationship for at least three hundred years. The term serves better than any other I can think of to express the insistent theme within black church history that white society and white Christianity were sick unto death and that sickness could be cured only by a radical *metanoia*.”<sup>6</sup> Wilmore gives special insight regarding the state of the Black church during the 1920s and 1930s and the factors that contributed to what he calls its “deradicalization.”

Several other writers examine the issue of Black consciousness from a Christian perspective. In their book *What Color Is Your God? Black Consciousness and the Christian Faith*, Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm present their views on how “genuine Christianity affirms a positive Black self-image and actively cooperates with Blacks as they struggle to liberate themselves from White oppression.”<sup>7</sup> Albert Cleage in 1968 documented his advocacy of a “Black Messiah” to aid the Black church in the liberation of its people. He used a poem written by Countee Cullen during the “Negro Renaissance” as an example of the difficulty Black people had worshiping a white Christ.<sup>8</sup> Also in the 1960s, James Cone expanded the centuries-old theme that “God is a Negro” into a systematic theology of Black liberation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 3d Printing, 1999 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), viii.

<sup>7</sup> Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm, *What Color Is Your God?—Black Consciousness and the Christian Faith* (New York: Citadel Press, 1988; New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Cleage, “The Black Messiah,” reprinted in James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: a Documentary History*, Vol. One (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003), 104.

<sup>9</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 3d Printing (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992)

## Harlem Renaissance History and Analysis

Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, published in 1925, is an anthology of works by and about African Americans during the early 1920s. As Locke states in the foreword:

This volume aims to document the New Negro culturally and socially—to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America that have so significantly taken place in the last few years. There is ample evidence of a New Negro in the latest phases of social change and progress, but still more in the internal world of the Negro mind and spirit.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of his pioneering work and incisive definitions, Locke became known to many as the “dean” of the Harlem Renaissance. The works collected in *The New Negro* represent the old guard intelligentsia as well as a transition to the strong voice of the Negro youth. They include social and cultural analyses along with poems, short stories, and artwork impressive in its African portrayals.

In the introduction to his anthology *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, editor and historian Nathan Huggins directly asks the question, “Could those forces which had sustained Afro-American culture—notably the Christian Church—be relied on as a continuing inspiration for the New Negro?”<sup>11</sup> Huggins’ collection of works from and about the Renaissance period includes political and literary essays, poetry, book excerpts, short stories, interviews, and an entire section titled “Christianity: Alien Gospel or Source of Inspiration?”

David Levering Lewis has written perhaps the most comprehensive social analysis of the Harlem Renaissance period to date. His seminal work, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, captures the very life and energy and symbiotic interactions of the players of that time. Lewis dissects the complex layers of social positioning and

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<sup>10</sup> Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, Inc., 1925; New York: Simon and Shuster, First Touchstone Edition 1997), xv.

<sup>11</sup> Nathan Huggins, ed., *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9.

individual posturing to create a fascinating tale of the “why” and “how” of the Harlem Renaissance. Although he felt that the Renaissance failed as a social movement, Lewis states that “the Renaissance left much to build upon and was to prove in time to have laid foundations for a revalidation of African-American cultural energies every bit as integral to the national experience as Alain Locke could have envisaged.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, author Cary Wintz details and analyzes the history, social setting, and relationships that went into making the Renaissance the literary and intellectual movement that it was. Wintz focuses on the role of Harlem as a center of Black literary affairs, the proponents and detractors of the movement, and even the concurrent white literary activities that impacted the period. In contrast to Lewis, Wintz declared the Renaissance a success.

Individual writers, after all, were not primarily concerned with social problems. They were interested in their literature and they wanted to give expression to the black experience—to write about life as they saw it and to look deeply into the black race’s existence in America. This they accomplished.<sup>13</sup>

James Weldon Johnson’s *Black Manhattan*, first published in 1930, tells the story of the “Negro in New York” from the beginning up through the 1920s. Johnson describes the precursors in the makings of the Harlem Renaissance in every creative area—literature, theater, art, and music. He also provides insight into the varied roles of the church in the Harlem community.

Langston Hughes’ first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, was published in 1940. Like *Black Manhattan*, it gives the valuable perspective of one who was a participant in, as well as an observer of, the Harlem Renaissance. Although now considered one of the primary contributors to the Renaissance, Hughes did not actually live in Harlem

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<sup>12</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), xxv.

<sup>13</sup> Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston, Tex.: Rice University Press, 1988), 231.

for much of the period, and therefore can be thought to offer some fairly objective commentary. *The Big Sea* actually contains a chapter titled “When the Negro Was in Vogue.” This work is also included because of the personal glimpse it allows into the author’s own relationship with Christianity.

Other autobiographies consulted in this study include *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* by Zora Neale Hurston.

Several biographies and collections of the works of major Renaissance artists provided valuable insights about their personal history. These include Gerald Early’s 75-page introduction to *My Soul’s High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen*; Tyrone Tillery’s *Claude McKay: A Black Poet’s Struggle for Identity*; Wayne Cooper’s *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*; Alice Walker’s edited volume of Zora Neale Hurston’s work, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing. . . and then again, when I am looking mean and impressive*; James Weldon Johnson’s *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* and *The Book of American Negro Poetry*; Arna Bontemps’ anthology of *American Negro Poetry*; David Levering Lewis’ *Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*; and Arnold Rampersad’s *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*.

The extensive biography on Langston Hughes by Arnold Rampersad (*The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume I: 1902-1941, I, Too, Sing America*) presents a picture of Hughes’ life specifically, and Black life more generally in America during the first three decades of the century, especially against the backdrop of the fuller national culture.

## **Methodology**

Methods used to examine the influence of Christianity on the Harlem Renaissance will include library research focused on historical studies of Christianity and literature in the African-American community into the 1930s, autobiographical and biographical research of the Harlem Renaissance writers, and an analysis of their writing. Intellectual and literary pursuits during the early decades of the century were paralleled by growth and diversity in the African American church. This study will examine possible correlations between these two groups.

The methodology will include highlights of the individual Christian backgrounds and experiences of select artists with whose works the Renaissance is closely identified. This study will address the artists' own perspectives, as told in their autobiographies and biographies.

This study will include an overview of selected works of the Harlem Renaissance period and provide an analysis of works relevant to this thesis. The discussion will focus on the underlying expression of certain themes derived from Christian Scripture, including the following:

- God's relation to humans—Jesus as Savior, deliverer, judge, source of hope
- Theme of equality (one God, one blood, one Spirit; no respect of persons)
- Celebration of African beauty/self as created by God and made in His image
- Christianity interwoven in the fabric of everyday life.

## **Chapter Overview**

Chapter 1, Introduction, sets the framework for the study, describing the author's intent and rationale for pursuing this topic. It includes a fairly extensive review of the socio-historical, religious, and literary documentation concerning the Harlem Renaissance period.

Chapter 2 will demonstrate that growth in intellectual and literary pursuits during the early decades of the twentieth century were paralleled by growth and diversity in the African American church. It is the consciousness that gave impetus to both of these tendencies that this writer will explore here. This portion of the paper will address the views of important turn-of-the-century figures as well as factors that influenced the urban religious landscape.

Chapter 3 will highlight the individual Christian background and experiences of some of the artists with whose works the Renaissance is most closely identified. This study will address the artists' own perspectives, as told in their autobiographies and biographies. Special attention will be given to exploring the existence of common characteristics in the lives of Renaissance artists.

This chapter will include an overview of the works of the Harlem Renaissance period and provide an examination of works relevant to this thesis. The discussion will focus on the underlying expression of certain themes derived from Christian Scripture and how they are portrayed in Renaissance works, especially the poetry.<sup>14</sup> This portion of the paper also will address the works of artists who, rather than embracing Christianity, may have used it in their works as a point of departure.

Chapter 4 will provide a summary assessment of the relationship between Christianity and the works of the Harlem Renaissance. It will review the answers found to the questions posed in the beginning of this thesis and attempt to place these cultural components in meaningful historical context.

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<sup>14</sup> All Scripture references in this paper are from the King James (Authorized Version) Bible.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL AFRICAN AMERICAN APPROPRIATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

The first three centuries of America's development reflected the struggle of a country's effort to define itself. This same challenge produced in the uprooted, enslaved African a need to come to terms with his new condition. And religion, especially Christianity, played no small part in the identification process.

The Africans who were brought to America as slaves brought with them their traditional indigenous religions. They revered their ancestors and worshiped God as seen in the natural universe that He created. Some of them were Muslims. Mostly from the West Coast of Africa, few of them were Christian, even though Christianity was not a stranger to the African continent. The Africans were by no means initially impressed with the religion that was imposed on them by those who enslaved them:

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. If the Africans south of the Sahara were slow to accept Christianity, it was not only because they were attached to their particular forms of tribal worship but also because they did not have the superhuman capacity to reconcile in their own minds the contradictory character of the new religion.<sup>1</sup>

Those who wished to use Christianity to justify slavery also referenced the so-called Biblical "curse of Ham," which they interpreted as relegating people of color to forever be servants to others.<sup>2</sup> This viewpoint would seem to have been a great

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<sup>1</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 38-41. The Biblical text for this notion can be found in Gen. 9:18-27, where Noah curses Canaan, a son of Ham, to be a servant of servants to his brothers because Ham saw Noah naked and drunk and told his brothers, who subsequently covered their father's nakedness.

deterrent to enslaved Africans who desired freedom, yet were taught this aspect of Christian theology.

Yet, in spite of these incongruities, the growing influence of Christianity on African Americans became reflected in their personal lives, their social institutions, their music, and especially their literature. The reasons for this growth in Christianity among African Americans may have been practical as well as spiritual. Perhaps those who had come from paternalistic societies easily identified with the biblical father Abraham as the one through whom all nations of the earth would be blessed. Others heard the story of Moses and the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and anticipated their own deliverance through an Almighty God. Also, the slaveholders' custom of separating slaves who were from the same tribe made it difficult to sustain the traditional religions in their indigenous format, as there was no infrastructure to support them. However, occasions for socialization at Christian services allowed the enslaved Africans to come together for hope, comfort, and sometimes, resistance.

Because they were allowed to practice Christianity, many enslaved Africans grew to embrace the religion of the slave master while making it uniquely their own. Church historians Anne Pinn and Anthony Pinn describe how "Enslaved Africans . . . made the Gospel of Christ a liberating religious experience by dropping the message of docility and instead understanding the Christian life as a free existence."<sup>3</sup> According to Juan Williams, some states considered ending the conversion of slaves to Christianity because of the high incidence of rebellions that emerged from independent Black churches.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Pinn and Anthony Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 12. Perhaps the Africans favored the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 7:21, "Art thou called a servant? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather."

<sup>4</sup> Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie, *This Far by Faith* (New York: Amistad/HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 31-32.



Africans who sought to maintain and practice their indigenous beliefs had to do so in secret and under threat of punishment. Some enslaved Africans in fairly isolated areas were able to retain important characteristics of their former religions. Studies of the Gullah population of South Carolina show that these enslaved Africans incorporated various West African rituals in their religious life. These included the tradition of secret societies and induction by water ritual (baptism), the concept of spiritual life after death, and the ring shout (an outward demonstration of being filled with the Holy Spirit).<sup>5</sup>

Certain aspects of African religions were incorporated into a practice and profession of Christianity that in many ways made this religion of enslaved Africans distinctively different from that practiced by their masters. African appropriations of Christianity were manifested in several ways. For example, music played an important role in the power of enslaved Africans to express themselves, both individually and collectively. “Robbed of the ability to communicate in many other ways, slaves raised their voices in songs that took form from African tonal patterns modified by the European religious songs heard in their masters’ churches.”<sup>6</sup> Traditional African drumming and the vocal call-and-response pattern became an integral part of African American religious and social music. Spirituals became the poetry of the slave quarters, allowing a freedom of expression that words alone could not convey.

Yet from the beginning, the African American population did learn to use their slave masters’ language along with the sacred word of the Christian Bible. History points to a strong relationship between African American literacy and Christianity.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 217.

### **Pre-Civil War (1700-1865)**

Prior to the late 1800s, much of the artistic expression of African American writers and artists was strongly steeped in a Christian tradition. Most of the few African Americans who could read and write English learned through using the Bible; as a result, early African American literature was grounded in Scripture. This Christian experience often combined with a strong protest element in African Americans to produce several genres of literary expression—the poem, the essay, and the autobiography, frequently in the form of slave narratives.

To the extent that a repertoire of eighteenth century African American literature existed, it was primarily the work of two major figures: Jupiter Hammon and Phyllis Wheatley. Both of these individuals were enslaved in northern colonies, where the proscription on training enslaved Africans to read and write was not nearly as strong as in the south. In fact, according to Pinn and Pinn, “The dominant version of the Christian faith found in northern colonies required some access to the written word and thus some degree of education.”<sup>7</sup>

Jupiter Hammon was an enslaved African in Long Island, New York, during the mid-eighteenth century, apparently under a master who was part of the Great Awakening of that time. “Growing into manhood during the years when the Wesleyan revival was strong both in England and America, Hammon was greatly influenced by the writings of Charles Wesley and William Cowper.”<sup>8</sup> Though enslaved, Hammon became an orthodox Calvinist preacher; his first published work, “An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries,” appeared in 1761. In this early writing, Hammon clearly expressed his personal relationship with God through Jesus

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<sup>7</sup> Pinn and Pinn, *Introduction to Black Church History*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 92.

Christ. Along with other prose and poetry, Hammon later published a long poem dedicated to Phyllis Wheatley.

Phyllis Wheatley was long the most celebrated African American poet, noted for her excellent imitations of the artistic expression of the dominant culture. As a young girl, she was a personal maid of a Boston woman who apparently encouraged her reading and writing. Wheatley wrote her first poem in 1770 as a teenager. “On the Death of the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield” gives evidence of a solid religious upbringing and relationship in the young girl’s life. Her first published book, *Poems of Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, reflects strong Christian themes and an evangelical slant.

Another African American author of the eighteenth century was Gustavus Vassa, an enslaved African from Nigeria who later purchased his freedom and wrote a narrative of his life. Vassa used his book as an occasion to condemn Christianity as it was practiced among whites who enslaved Black people, especially in view of the *raison d’être* of the Revolutionary War and the equality of man proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence: “O ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you—Learned you this [slavery] from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men do unto you?”<sup>9</sup> Vassa had obviously learned enough of the tenets of Christianity to know that the religion he saw being practiced by whites in the new America was not what the Bible taught.

The Bible provided a message of deliverance, and deliverance was a recurring theme in this early literature by African Americans. During the early nineteenth century, slave narratives and abolitionist literature were the prevailing forms of African American expression. According to historian John Hope Franklin, “Blacks

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<sup>9</sup> Gustavus Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oloudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa*; quoted in Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 95.

became much more articulate in the antebellum years than they had been during the previous century. There were poets, playwrights, historians, newspaper editors, and others who provided a black perspective to the world.”<sup>10</sup> Much of the work naturally had a strong anti-slavery message, and Christianity was often used as a tool in the attempt to obtain the support of white sympathizers or to influence white oppressors to forsake the institution of slavery, with its inherent evils.

David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet represented free black Christian ministers who used their voices and their writings to protest the institution of slavery. In Walker’s 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, he attributed to white Christianity the responsibility for the condition of Blacks throughout the world.<sup>11</sup> And Garnet advocated active resistance to slavery, along with the emigration of African Americans to Africa, where they would be able to build their own free society. In speaking of Garnet and other Black ministers, sociologist Gayraud Wilmore states, “These ministers refused to spiritualize the concept of liberty. . . .They understood the freedom that Christ brought in very concrete terms. For them it was nothing less than freedom from chattel slavery.”<sup>12</sup> Other free Blacks wrote and distributed newspapers and journals to forward the cause of liberty for Africans in America.

Maria Stewart, perhaps the first Black female political writer, wrote religious tracts in the 1830s intended to enlighten and encourage Black people. Her anti-slavery lectures condemned enslavement of the body and of the mind, also decrying what she apparently perceived as the laxness of free Blacks in pursuing educational

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<sup>10</sup> Franklin and Moss, 163.

<sup>11</sup> Hine, Hine, and Harrold, *The African American Odyssey*, 171.

<sup>12</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 268.

opportunities: “Yet, after all, methinks there are no chains so galling as those the bind the soul, and exclude it from the vast field of useful and scientific knowledge.”<sup>13</sup>

Although the 1800s saw various types of African American literature produced, by far the most prevalent genre was the slave narrative. The most famous of these was *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, written in 1845. Many of the narratives highlighted the cruelty and hypocrisy of a people who claimed to be Christian, and yet did not practice the tenets of Christianity as revealed in the Bible. Sojourner Truth was a living epistle, delivering messages of hope and freedom throughout the northern states to influence the delivery of her people from bondage. She “could not read, but...did not allow her illiteracy to prevent her from studying the Bible. She memorized significant sections of the text, particularly passages from the four Gospels.”<sup>14</sup>

Common to all of these forms of expression, Christianity was a primary and motivating theme. African Americans had a real zeal in soliciting and promoting a God who could deliver them from their oppressed condition in this nation. And they did not falter in pointing out the hypocrisy with which white Americans practiced their version of Christianity, in opposition to the true, liberating Word of God. This spiritual crusade of using Christianity as a liberation tool propelled African Americans through the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War. However, new battles remained to be fought for the hearts and souls of men.

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<sup>13</sup> Maria Stewart, “Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 204.

<sup>14</sup> Williams and Dixie, *This Far By Faith*, 91.

## **Post-Civil War (1865-1900)**

The physical deliverance from slavery in 1865 did not necessarily translate to real freedom. With the end of slavery came the promise of a freedom that was never realized; the political progress made during Reconstruction was short-lived. Restrictive social conditions for African Americans following the war demanded a new set of prophets to promote their cause. It was in this environment that the African American church truly began to flourish. During the late 1700s, the independent Black church had been formally established by free Black people in the north in response to their being denied equal treatment in the white churches. One contemporary writer has commented, “This action of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in forming and controlling separate black churches is an early glimpse of the use of positive self-image and of power to build an independent base of true Black expression in America.”<sup>15</sup>

Now with the exponentially increased base of African American congregants in the person of freed slaves, who formerly could only attend camp meetings or receive carefully tailored religious instruction from their slave masters, the Black church became a central point of focus for the social and religious education of African Americans. Aided by missionary teachers from the north, the Black church was instrumental in establishing schools and providing a forum for the general uplift of the population. According to historian Carter G. Woodson, “All of the church aid societies and many of those beyond the control of churchmen had for their purpose the industrial, social, intellectual, and religious improvement of the freedman. The capstone of the structure they would build then had its foundation in moral and

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<sup>15</sup> Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm, *What Color Is Your God? Black Consciousness and the Christian Faith* (New York: Citadel Press, 1988; New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), 54.

religious instruction.”<sup>16</sup> It was not unusual for churches to form and/or host literary societies in their facilities where aspiring young African American artists could display their written and oratorical talents and discuss works of literature. These literary societies served as a training ground for young orators, honed their reasoning skills, and provided valuable social discipline for all participants. They continued into the next century, becoming a forum for artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, many schools and churches were built in the endeavor to elevate Black people to their rightful place in society. Over 75 historically Black colleges and universities had their beginnings between 1865 and 1899.<sup>17</sup> Table 2.1 shows the religious affiliations of many of the Black schools established during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What was the influence of this religious-based instruction found in almost every school established for African Americans? Even though it played a manipulated role in pacifying, indoctrinating, and subduing Black people, historian Woodson attributes the following positive effect from constant reading of the Bible:

Whether or not a Negro attended Sunday school, he heard read to him from the Bible two or three times a week dramatic history, philosophical essays, charming poetry, and beautiful oratory. . . . Under the continuous instruction of the Negro preacher, the youth . . . had his intellectual appetite whetted with the desire to seek after the mysteries.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 3d ed. (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1942), 194.

<sup>17</sup> Cynthia L. Jackson and Eleanor F. Nunn, *Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Woodson, *History of the Negro Church*, 245.

Table 2.1 Establishment of Black Educational Institutions



Year	School	Affiliation
1837	Institute for Colored Youth (Cheyney)	Quaker (Richard Humphreys)
1843	Ohio African University (Wilberforce University)	African Methodist Episcopal Church
1854	Lincoln University, Pennsylvania	Presbyterian Church
1856	Wilberforce University	African Methodist Episcopal Church
1865	Shaw University	New England missionary Elijah Shaw
1865	Virginia Union University	American Baptist Home Mission Society
1866	Brown Theological Institute (Edward Waters College)	African Methodist Episcopal Church
1866	Rust College (Shaw University)	Methodist Episcopal Church
1867	Atlanta University	American Missionary Association
1867	Augusta Institute (Atlanta Baptist Seminary, Morehouse College)	Reverend Edmund Turney, Reverend William Jefferson White, Richard Coulter (former slave)
1867	Barber-Scotia College	Presbyterian Church
1867	Biddle Memorial Institute (Johnson C. Smith University)	Presbyterian Church
1867	Saint Augustine's College	Episcopal Church
1869	Clark College	Methodist Episcopal Church

Table 2.1 (Continued)

Year	School	Affiliation
1869	Tougaloo College	American Missionary Association
1870	Allen University	African Methodist Episcopal Church
1871	LeMoyne-Owen College	American Missionary Association of the Congregational Church
1872	Cookman Institute for Men	Reverend D. S. B. Darnell
1872	Paul Quinn College	African American Episcopalians
1873	Simmons University	Black Baptist
1873	Bennett College	United Methodist Church
1873	Wiley College	United Methodist Church
1875	Knoxville College	United Presbyterian Church of North America
1876	Tuscaloosa Institute (Stillman College)	Presbyterian Church
1877	Walden Seminary (Philander Smith College)	Little Rock Annual conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church
1878	Selma University	Alabama State Baptist Convention
1879	Zion Wesley Institute (Livingston College)	African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
1880	Livingstone College	African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

Table 2.1 (Continued)

Year	School	Affiliation
1881	Morris Brown College	African Methodist Episcopal Church
1882	Lane College	Former slave and the CME Church
1884	Arkansas Baptist College	American Baptist Churches
1888	St. Paul's College	Episcopalian
1894	Texas College	CME Church
1905	Miles College	Colored (Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church
1908	Morris College	Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention
1912	Jarvis Christian College	Christian Church/Disciples of Christ
1915	Xavier University of Louisiana	Roman Catholic

Source: Cynthia L. Jackson and Eleanor F. Nunn, *Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003), 2-13; Pinn and Pinn, 35-48.

Thus, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, many African Americans became educated to a degree that they never before could have imagined. Because so many other roads were closed to them, learning the three R's (reading, [w]riting, 'rithmetic) was viewed as the minimum requirement to receive access to the benefits of American society. Through the efforts of the Freedman's Bureau and church missionaries, the rudiments of education were made available to the masses of freed slaves. And higher education opportunities grew phenomenally. For the first time, an intellectual elite among the African American community was made possible.

Into such an environment Booker T. Washington rose to fame, though formerly enslaved in Alabama. Washington was educated at Hampton University and later founded Tuskegee Institute. He saw industrial education as the way for African Americans to obtain entrance and acceptance into the greater society. Washington held this view as especially true concerning the economic condition of his people. Applying a form of Puritan ethics involving thrift, savings, and hard work, Washington felt that African Americans could control their own destiny regarding how well they fared in the land. Although viewed as a spokesman for the majority of African Americans, Washington and his vocational model did little to encourage the free flowering of speech and expression for highly educated Blacks. Interestingly, the literature of that period also had a rather accommodationist tone (possibly in keeping with the tone set by Washington himself as a race leader), as evidenced by the plantation tradition represented in the dialectic poetry and short stories of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the subtle protest and psychological posturing of Charles Chesnutt.

Both of these men were widely acclaimed writers whose works were read and accepted by both Black and white audiences. Whereas African American authors previously had used Christian themes largely as a protest tool, Dunbar and Chesnutt

interwove Christian topics into their writings as a natural part of the everyday life of Blacks. Indeed, Chesnutt's stories acknowledged the superstitious features of African American religion as well. He thus exhibited a degree of integrity in his writing that presented African Americans as just simply human, replete with the same complexities, foibles, and intelligence as anyone else. One of Chesnutt's most famous short stories, "The Goophered Grapevine," has as its main character Uncle Julius, who sees no conflict in addressing his audience with "Lawd bless you, suh"<sup>19</sup> and describing the bewitching activities of a conjure woman.

In Dunbar's poem "The Party," he describes the food, fun, and frolic at a great gathering of folks from four different plantations. Of the dancing he said, "An' de Christuns an' de sinnahs got so mixed up on dat flo', Dat I don't see how dey'd pahted ef de trump had chanced to blow."<sup>20</sup> On a more serious note in "We Wear the Mask," Dunbar expresses the painful ambiguity of putting a happy face on the Black people's situation while praying to God for relief. "We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries / To Thee from tortured souls arise."<sup>21</sup>

For many, the religion of Christianity as practiced in America seemed to be a key component of the oppression of Black people. Even some Black preachers despaired that African Americans would ever truly be free in such a racist society. Henry McNeal Turner, commissioned as a chaplain in the Union Army during the Civil War, later became a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal church. Turner was an educated free Black in South Carolina who had been tutored as a teenager by two white lawyers. He began ministering at age 19 and became noted for his learned and passionate preaching. However, Turner was discriminated against in the Black

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<sup>19</sup> Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," in *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*, ed. James Emanuel and Theodore Gross (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, "The Party," in Emanuel and Gross, 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

church for his educational level and in the white church for his skin color. He later became a forceful spokesman for the cause of immigrating to Africa to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. Turner saw it as the duty of Black people to Christianize those in their homeland the right way, teaching that they were created in God's own image:

Every race of people since time began who have attempted to describe their God by words, or by paintings, or by carvings, or by any other form or figure, have conveyed the idea that the God who made them and shaped their destinies was symbolized in themselves, and why should not the Negro believe that he resembles God as much so as other people? We do not believe there is any hope for a race of people who do not believe they look like God.<sup>22</sup>

When Turner made these statements in 1898, he was one of the first African Americans to verbalize so succinctly the problem with how Blacks internalized the image of God they had been taught. The continued hypocrisy of the white church and the racialized religion that it espoused (having earlier licensed Turner, but not given him a church) combined with the accommodating nature of the Black church left him no recourse but to seek a different venue for what he felt God had called him to do.

### **The Twentieth Century—A New Approach for a New Time**

In 1903, William Edward Burghardt DuBois, educated at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin, published his outstanding work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. This extraordinary collection of essays on the conditions of African Americans remains essential to understanding the heart and soul of a people at the turn of the century. While important in the historical analysis and social commentary that it offers, it is more than either of these. *The Souls of Black Folk* is a literary landmark. In this book, DuBois articulated issues that still generate serious study and discussion

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<sup>22</sup> Henry McNeal Turner, quoted from *The Voice of Missions* in Williams and Dixie, *This Far by Faith*, 103.

over 100 years later. Infusing it throughout with painful questions, DuBois lays bare his own soul—naked, wounded, seeking solace, seeking answers. The book consists of fourteen thought-provoking chapters on every aspect of the African Americans’ strivings in this country—historical, social, economic, educational, political, and religious. Each chapter is preceded by a verse of what DuBois calls the “sorrow songs,” born out of Africa, nurtured by the slave experience, and constituting “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”<sup>23</sup>

In the first chapter, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” DuBois sets forth his most famous metaphor, that of the Veil through which Black people view themselves. “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>24</sup> This is the Veil that allowed Paul Laurence Dunbar to write successful plantation stories and dialect poetry, acclaimed by both Blacks and whites. This same Veil caused Charles Chesnutt to hide his racial identity in the beginning of his literary career. Interestingly, DuBois figuratively rent the Veil in two when he announced in the forethought to *The Souls of Black Folk*, “And finally, need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?”<sup>25</sup> In essence, DuBois was declaring his independence of the Veil. This statement is perhaps a precursor to the thoughts of Langston Hughes more than 20 years later, when he declared his desire to “express his own dark self without fear or shame,” i.e., to write as though the Veil did not exist.

An important topic discussed in the book is the type of training that Black people should receive. DuBois described three divergent trains of thought influencing

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<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (1903; reprint, with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 178.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxii.

the possible solutions to this problem. One was the general cooperation of all men to solve the cultural problems of the land; the second was the attitude that African Americans, being inferior, should be kept behind the Veil and not provided access to the fullness of manhood; the third strain was from the Black people themselves, who wanted nothing less than full access to all that life had to offer. According to DuBois, “This is the tangle of thought and afterthought wherein we are called to solve the problem of training men for life.”<sup>26</sup> DuBois went on to promote education as the solution to setting this tangle straight.

Unlike Booker T. Washington, DuBois believed that industrial education and the doctrine of materialism were insufficient to address the needs of the diverse population of African Americans, indeed, the souls of Black folk. “The life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment” (Luke 12:22). Washington’s philosophy of education gave limited opportunity to the most educated African Americans, whom DuBois referred to as the “Talented Tenth” of the race. DuBois saw this intelligentsia as critical to elevating the race culturally, to a place where Black people could compete fairly with other races of the world. DuBois clearly anticipated the effects of such a body of men on the internal mindset of the people as well as their acceptance on equal terms in the larger society. Reading was fundamental; but now African Americans had gained unprecedented access to the highest levels of Western cultural and educational resources, and the possibilities were unlimited. DuBois joined with Alexander Crummell and other African American intellectuals in 1898 to form the American Negro Academy, an organization that “promoted the exchange of ideas among black intellectuals and helped perpetuate the black protest tradition in an age of accommodations and proscription.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>27</sup> Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 288.



*The Souls of Black Folk* was DuBois' very own sorrow song. While he solemnly decried the limitations that life then offered for African Americans, he had high hopes for the good that the volume might accomplish. DuBois reflected on the importance of Christianity in the life of African Americans by devoting the last third of the book to religious life and spiritual conditions. He ended the book by not only singing his song to the world, but also lifting it up as a prayer to God:

#### The Afterthought

Here my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world wilderness. Let there spring, Gentle One, from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful. Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is mockery and a snare. Thus in Thy good time may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed

THE END<sup>28</sup>

*The Souls of Black Folk* was hardly the end, but indeed a milestone in a period of honest and open self-expression by African Americans dedicated to changing their lot in this country and in the world. As affirmed by religious historian Gayraud Wilmore, "The centrality of the idea of self-improvement, uplift, the 'advancement of colored people', or elevation, is evident in much of the literature of the slave and the free African American in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."<sup>29</sup> Protest was no longer the singular guiding principle. Black people were now determined to become enlightened about themselves, to define themselves for themselves, outside of the Veil. Carter G. Woodson commented about this period: "The Negro churchmen of to-day realize, as most leaders of the race do, that the hope of the blacks lies not in

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<sup>28</sup> DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 189.

<sup>29</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 262.

politics from without but in race uplift from within in the form of social amelioration and economic development.”<sup>30</sup>

Soon after the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, several other organizations were established, some multi-racial and philanthropic, designed to advance the cause of the darker peoples of the world. In the midst of this heightened activity concerning the condition of African Americans, there came to the American shores a West Indian by the name of Marcus Garvey. Born in Jamaica, Garvey studied in England and established the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in his homeland before coming to America in 1916 to raise funds for his organization.

Garvey had been inspired by Booker T. Washington’s program of self-help and economic development. But he added to that mix a fierce cry for racial pride and self-determination of Black people throughout the world, based on their God-given status. To a people deprived of their civil and human rights and hungry for affirmation, Garvey’s message had a tremendous appeal. By the end of 1920, according to Garvey, the UNIA boasted a worldwide following of over 4 million; even his detractors conceded that the organization probably had at least a half-million members.<sup>31</sup>

Raised and educated as a Christian, Garvey created into his organization a brand of Christianity that was distinctively for people of African descent. He did not shy away from controversial pronouncements concerning Black people’s relationship to God:

The black man has a greater claim to the cross than all other men. If it is a symbol of Christ’s triumph then the Negro should share in that triumph that Simon the Cyrenian who bore it, did. . . .The cross is the heritage of the black man, don’t give it up. This has nothing to do with

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<sup>30</sup> Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 288.

<sup>31</sup> Marcus Garvey, *Selected Writings and Speeches of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Bob Blaisdell (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 7; Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 358.

the Roman Catholic religion. This is our religion and our interpretation of the significance of the Cross and Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Garvey thus encouraged his people to see the cross not just as a symbol of suffering, but of eventual victory. He conceptualized and executed an ambitious program of racial pride and self-respect. Like Henry Highland Garnet and others before him, Garvey advocated and planned for a return of Africans to their indigenous homeland of Africa, where he believed that God intended for Black people to realize their triumph.

In his introduction to *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, editor Robert Hill discussed how a “similar reversal of white-dictated beliefs and standards were reflected in Garvey’s fervent praise of the compelling beauty of black skin and African features; in his championing of the worship of Black images of the Virgin Mary, God, and Jesus Christ in the place of white conceptions of the deity....”<sup>33</sup> The blue-eyed, white Jesus whose image had long been perpetuated in American art and literature was re-imagined and conceived in Black form.

Never admit that Jesus Christ was a white man, otherwise he could not be the Son of God and God to redeem all mankind. Jesus Christ had the blood of all races in his veins, and tracing the Jewish race back to Abraham and to Moses, from which Jesus sprang through the line of Jesse, you will find Negro blood everywhere, so Jesus had much of Negro blood in him. Read the genealogical tree of Jesus in the Bible and you will learn from where he sprang....The first civilization was the Negro’s—black people.<sup>34</sup>

An important feature of the UNIA was its widely read newspaper, the *Negro World*, which published all of Garvey’s speeches and race-building editorials. The newspaper also published a “Poetry for the People” section, affording many writers of

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<sup>32</sup> Marcus Garvey, in *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, eds. Robert A. Hill and Barbara Bair (Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1987), 237.

<sup>33</sup> Robert A. Hill, introduction to *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, xxxix.

<sup>34</sup> Hill and Bair, *Marcus Garvey*, 196.

the Harlem Renaissance period a worldwide audience. The Negro World sponsored a literary competition as early as 1921, years before the 1925 Opportunity event that is regarded by some as a defining point in the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>35</sup> As part of his teachings on the accomplishments of Black people, Garvey stated:

Africa has produced countless numbers of men and women in war and in peace whose luster and bravery outshine that of any other people. Then why not see good and perfect in ourselves? We must inspire a literature and promulgate a doctrine of our own without any apologies to the powers that be. The right is ours and God's.<sup>36</sup>

The preceding statement seems almost a manifesto for the “New Negro Renaissance” in arts and letters that characterized the 1920s. Even though Garvey expressed little direct support for such a renaissance, his teachings and views were reflected throughout much of the literature of the period. Garvey was a leader of the masses of the people; many Harlem Renaissance artists chose to portray the life of the common man. Garvey preached that Black was beautiful; Renaissance artists depicted the internal and external beauty of things African. Garvey set up a hierarchy of Black royalty in his organization and in the African Orthodox Church; Renaissance artists heralded the royal heritage of Africa. Of course, Garvey did not originate these themes; many of them can be extracted from passages in the Christian Bible. But Garvey can be credited with creating and displaying a visible manifestation of these Biblical teachings that people could see, touch, and feel like never before. Table 2.2 compares themes of Garvey’s messages with Scriptural references.

An important occurrence that helped to make Garvey’s movement a widespread success was the migration of African Americans out of the South into the urban centers of the Northern states during World War I. History has recorded that

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<sup>35</sup> Tony Martin, ed., *African Fundamentalism: A Literary and Cultural Anthology of Garvey’s Harlem Renaissance* (Dover, Mass.: The Majority Press), 1991.

<sup>36</sup> Garvey, in *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, 14.

more than 1 million Black people left the South during this first Great Migration from 1910 to 1930.<sup>37</sup> Many factors contributed to this exodus—the slump in southern agricultural production attributed to the boll weevil; the decrease in foreign immigrant workers in northern industry and resulting job opportunities; and especially the continuing injustices perpetrated against African Americans in the South, from disenfranchisement to lynching. In view of such conditions, the North beckoned as the Promised Land.

Many Blacks also immigrated to New York from the Caribbean. According to historian John Hope Franklin, “Militant blacks from the West Indies migrated to the great city in large numbers and were ready to join in any movement for the improvement of conditions among blacks.”<sup>38</sup>

Thus, Garvey was able to establish a strong base in Harlem for the UNIA. The African Americans who populated that community had also likely experienced disillusionment at the failure of traditional Christianity to produce material changes in their social condition. Given the choice to experience freedom in this lifetime instead of next, many Blacks elected to maximize the present by whatever means necessary. Franklin commented: “The effect of the Garvey doctrines on the unlettered and inexperienced urban element, recently removed from the farm, was magnetic.”<sup>39</sup>

Many other factors contributed to changes in the African American community and church during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Conservative and progressive elements in the church had been slowly drifting apart--some concentrating on individual salvation while others were focusing on social activism. Further stratification in the African American church came with the massive migration of

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<sup>37</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990; Thirteenth Printing, 2003), 118.

<sup>38</sup> Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 364.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

Table 2.2 Correlation of Garvey's Themes with Scriptural References

Scripture Reference	Text	Theme
Gal. 3:28-29	There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.	All men are not only equal, but as one in Christ Jesus, and entitled as heirs of God.
Ps. 148:6	Let them praise the name of the Lord: for he commanded, and they were created. He hath also stablished them for ever and ever: he hath made a decree which shall not pass.	God is the Creator of everlasting life.
Gen. 1:26-27	And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . . and let them have dominion. . . .So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.	All men are created, with power, in the image and likeness of God.
Mark 16:15	Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.	Christianity is for all people.
Acts 17:26	And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.	God created all men and determined the time and place of our lives.
Deut. 32:8	When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel.	God determined our dwelling place and the arena in which we are to live our lives.
Ps. 68:31	Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.	God affirms the royalty of Africans and their relationship with Him.

Table 2.2 (Continued)

Scripture Reference	Text	Theme
Song of Sol. 1:5	I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.	Black people are exquisitely beautiful.
Eph. 2:13-14	But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us.	There should be unity among all people in the Body of Christ.
Rom. 2:10-11	But glory, honor, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile; For there is no respect of persons with God.	The statutes of God apply to all men equally.
John 14:6	I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me.	Jesus Christ is the truth and giver of true life.
John 8:32, 36	And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. . . . If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.	The truth of Jesus brings freedom of the mind.
Gal. 5:1	Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.	Once free, stay free.
1 Pet. 2:9-10	But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.	God has chosen us to be royalty.
Rev. 1:6	And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father;	We are royal servants of God.



Table 2.2 (Continued)

Scripture Reference	Text	Theme
Rom. 1:20	<p>For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.</p>	<p>Everyone can know that God is God by the things that He has made, showing forth his power and divine nature.</p>
1 Tim. 2:1-6	<p>I exhort, therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;</p> <p>For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.</p> <p>For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our savior;</p> <p>Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.</p> <p>For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;</p> <p>Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.</p>	<p>We must pray for all men, and salvation is available for all men.</p>

Blacks from the South to the northern states during World War I, resulting in a splintered people who sought God in many different ways. The traditional African American church did not meet the needs of many Blacks who were economically disadvantaged here on earth and were unwilling to rest only in the hope of a better life in the hereafter. The climate was ripe for the development of a variety of independent Black churches.

Thus Bishop George McGuire, chaplain-general of the UNIA, founded the Independent Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in 1919. Out of that congregation was born one of the most visible independent churches of this period, the African Orthodox Church which, in line with Garvey's philosophy, boasted a Black God, a Black Jesus, a Black Madonna, and Black angels. According to Williams and Dixie, "The African Orthodox Church borrowed its liturgy from Catholicism and the Anglican Church, but its message of black nationalism and autonomy resulted in a religious body with a radically different theology and interpretation of the Bible and its teachings."<sup>40</sup>

Another independent religion that gained prominence near the beginning of the twentieth century was Pentecostalism. Developing out of the Holiness movement, which focused on sanctification following salvation, the Pentecostal movement added the aspect of speaking in tongues by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to their Christian faith (Acts Chapter 2 provides the full story of the Biblical "Day of Pentecost," at which time the Holy Spirit descended upon a gathering of Christians of all nations, and individuals began speaking in languages they did not know). The growth of Pentecostalism was greatly impacted by the 1906 Azusa Street Revival led by George Seymour. Interestingly, this three-year revival, though led by an African American preacher, drew many people from different races and even foreign

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<sup>40</sup> Williams and Dixie, *This Far by Faith*, 182.

countries. Pentecostalism was not just a Sunday worship experience; with its emphasis on holiness and the empowering by the Holy Spirit, it spoke to every aspect of the everyday Christian life. According to Pinn and Pinn:

To some extent, this theological thrust on the part of African American Pentecostalism was a critique of mainstream Methodist and Baptist churches that showed little concern for African American migrants during the Great Migration . . . . Many of these migrants embraced styles of worship and had socioeconomic needs that mainstream churches found difficult to deal with. But the growing Pentecostal movement within African American communities, ignited by Seymour, provided opportunity for migrants to work toward a creative intersection between their religious identity and their social vision.<sup>41</sup>

One man who participated in the Azusa Street Revival began his own independent church. George Baker, later known as Father Divine, combined teachings of religious holiness with social action to create what has been referred to as a way to acquire heaven on earth. He began his teaching in Georgia, but soon moved to New York where he established a community of followers in what later became known as the Peace Mission Movement.

. . . Father Divine envisioned leading countless Americans from different racial and economic backgrounds to a new homeland where peace, happiness, and wealth flourished for all. . . . His charismatic appeal stemmed in part from the astute manner in which he merged seemingly disparate religious traditions—such as Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism, New Thought (similar to Scientology), and Methodism—into his own constructed theology. As in his operations in the South, Father Divine provided housing, food, and counseling to those in need.<sup>42</sup>

An important aspect of Father Divine's movement was that his followers considered him to be God. Historians Franklin and Moss view the flourishing of such a movement as “a testimonial of the extent of the social ills from which the body

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<sup>41</sup> Pinn and Pinn, *Introduction to Black Church History*, 111.

<sup>42</sup> Williams and Dixie, *This Far by Faith*, 166-167.

politic suffered and was one more indication of the tremendous frustration that characterized many blacks and some whites as well.”<sup>43</sup> At its peak, the Peace Mission Movement is estimated to have encompassed approximately 10,000 members and 150 Peace Mission centers throughout the country.<sup>44</sup>

Also of note as an independent church movement during the early part of the century was the Moorish Science Temple. Established in 1913 by Noble Drew Ali in Newark as the Canaanite Temple, this Islamic-based religion also drew on some elements of Christianity. Ali apparently recognized the incredible power of language on the mindset and thus refused to use any of the conventional terminology for his people. Ali went even further than Garvey in casting off the negative images associated with Africa and Christianity; he asserted that African Americans had denied their true identity as Moors and were even praying to the wrong God.

By claiming Islam as the true religion of Moorish Americans, Ali provided a new religious outlet for blacks that did not overlook the color consciousness of American religion, as Christianity often did. Instead, it took responsibility for blacks’ slow social progress out of white hands and placed it squarely on black shoulders. This transfer gave blacks an opportunity to control their own destiny instead of ceding their power to whites.<sup>45</sup>

The Moorish Science Temple represented a new way of thinking about themselves for many African Americans. Perhaps its greatest appeal lay in the power it gave, even through its very name, to define one’s own past, present, and future.

Unfortunately, religious cults, charlatans, and shysters became notorious during this period, perhaps in part because of the lack of institutional oversight for some independent churches. Traditional African American churches had long had their share of leaders whose primary motivation was personal gain. However, even

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<sup>43</sup> Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 360.

<sup>44</sup> Williams and Dixie, *This Far by Faith*, 168.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

within organizations such as the Moorish Science Temple, oversight was a problem. According to Williams and Dixie, Noble Drew Ali “tried to pick men with significant formal education in the hope that their learning would benefit the rank and file membership. Unfortunately, he discovered that several of his appointees were fleeing the poor temple members, demanding they purchase religious amulets and other trinkets.”<sup>46</sup>

Instead of the dignity that had characterized Black churches of the previous century, a reputation of trickery and hypocrisy became associated with too many churches. By some standards, the traditional African American church had fallen into discredit and, for some, was a source of mockery and shame. Many people decided to forsake church altogether, and others avowed atheism or agnosticism. Historian Carter G. Woodson describes several factors that contributed to the demise of the almost monolithic support that the Christian church traditionally held in the African American community. In discussing the phenomenon of religious cults, Woodson said the following:

The movement has not been a sudden transition, but the migration of 1916-18 gave an unusual stimulus to this trend in the religion of the Negro. In those days when dislocated communicants in the industrial centers found themselves in a strange land they were easily proselytized by strange prophets.<sup>47</sup>

Woodson credited weak and hypocritical leadership as another reason for the Black church losing some of its appeal during this period:

The youth and the talented tenth of the congregations have left the church in considerable numbers not so much because of doctrinal difference as because of dislike for its leadership and lack of a program....many Negro members have ceased to cooperate with the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>47</sup> Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 301.

church because of its failure to retain that sanctity and holiness which were once found in the religion of the earlier generations.”<sup>48</sup>

A third factor to which Woodson attributes what he considered the weakened stature of the Black church was the perceived failure of Christian theology:

Some of the Negroes of the type now leaving the churches do so not because of the Negro church itself but because of the increasing tendency to regard our so-called Christianity as a failure. They look not at the practices of Negro communicants but at those of the whites from whom the Negroes took over their religion. The white man professing to be a Christian is the greatest antagonist to the practice of the principles taught by Jesus of Nazareth. The hands of the church itself are stained with slavery, its members destroy nations blocking their way, dispossess the helpless, and massacre the unoffending. *Negroes of advanced thought are now saying openly that, if this is Christianity, the world must find a new way out of darkness to God* [emphasis added].<sup>49</sup>

The church was not the only place of transition in the African American community. Life for African Americans had a much broader scope following the turn of the century, and especially after World War I, with Black people in the armed services experiencing life overseas. No longer limited to the boundaries of the plantation, or even a self-contained free “colored” community, African Americans were exposed to many different people, places, and things. In the words of one pastor, “Exposure creates options; options create choices; and choices determine the outcome of our lives.”<sup>50</sup> Once the freed men gained mobility and access to new information and ideas and ideals, they began to look for additional solutions to their socioeconomic plight. Having been long denied the opportunity of choice, African Americans began to explore other religions, systems, and organizations as tools to effect change in their

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>50</sup> John A. Cherry, II, Sermon “Restoring the Breaches,” From the Heart Church Ministries, Temple Hills, Md., 30 July 2006.

situation. Christianity was no longer the ultimate panacea that it perhaps once represented for many African Americans.

In addition, World War I had a profound effect on the psyche of both Black and white people in America. Black Americans were faced with the patriotic irony of fighting for democracy abroad while suffering economic and political oppression, lynching, and race riots at home. In the social context, they were always in the position of constantly proving that they were men. For many African Americans, segregated Harlem represented a mecca of sorts, where they could own property, build churches, run businesses, and create a culture peculiarly insulated from the national proscriptions and prejudices.

White Americans, especially in the South, tightened the socio-economic and political reins that kept Blacks separate and unequal and candidates for lynching, possibly because of fear that enlightened Blacks, spurred by their now worldly and sophisticated returning soldiers, would upset the balance of power. However, some whites, with heightened awareness of the new socialist philosophies and the perceived spiritual barrenness of their own culture, began to look elsewhere for the passion that their indigenous experiences denied.

It was into such an environment that the Harlem Renaissance was born.

CHAPTER 3  
THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE SPEAKS OF RELIGION—  
PERSONAL AND ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVES

The period known as the Harlem Renaissance has been greatly characterized by the perceived exoticism of Black people, as though newly discovered by white America. In the early 1920s, white people began coming to Harlem in large numbers, seeking a world and a people that had not lost their spirit and creativity. In his article “The Caucasian Storms Harlem,” Renaissance author Rudolph Fisher provided an intimate and lively picture of the Harlem nightlife that had been overtaken by whites, club by club.<sup>1</sup> Blacks were there to entertain, and entertain they did. Harlem of the 1920s earned a lasting reputation as a place where the cabarets and speakeasies never closed and a good time could be had by all.

Many of the writers and other artists who became associated with the Harlem Renaissance promoted, by their works and their lifestyles, the carefree, uninhibited Harlem. Some Black artists catered to this image of the primitive, free-spirited race, taking full advantage of the financial support of white patrons who found in Black people the freedom of creative expression that their own race constrictions may have denied. But there was also that element of the artists who simply wanted to be their creative best, in whatever way they chose.

Langston Hughes was but one artist who endeavored to throw off the restraints of always playing to the white audience. He also rejected the notion of using art to “show off” the degree to which Blacks could assimilate white culture, thereby

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolph Fisher, “The Caucasian Storms Harlem,” reprinted from *American Mercury*, 1927, in David Levering Lewis, ed., *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 114.



promoting the value of black folks in society. In his article “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes affirms the right of the artist to be true to himself, “without fear or shame. . . . We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

Overcoming this racial mountain involved portraying what the artists perceived as the truth about themselves and their people, in all its ugliness and its beauty, too. The artists of the Harlem Renaissance were free to express, as African Americans had never before, what they really thought about themselves and their relationship with the world. Religious historian Gayraud Wilmore attributes to the writers exceptional insight in assessing precisely the truth of a situation. He posed that “. . . creative writers often see more clearly than theologians the dimension of depth in life and culture that yields more truth than philosophical speculation and exposes the raw, mysterious edges of existence in the language and symbols of the folk, mediated by artistic genius.”<sup>3</sup>

So what was the “truth” about Christianity and the artists of the Harlem Renaissance? Who were these “New Negroes” who came to speak through their literature and their music for the masses of Black people in America? What was their upbringing and environment? How did they build their “temples for tomorrow”? What role did Christianity play in their lives? Were the artists true to themselves in reflecting it in their art?

This chapter will explore the answers to these questions by first presenting relevant information on the personal lives of some of the artists. The next segment will demonstrate how traditional Christian Biblical themes are portrayed in their literature,

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<sup>2</sup> Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” reprinted in Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1271.

<sup>3</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 3d ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 261.

concentrating primarily on the poetry of the period (some pertinent novels and short stories are referenced, also). A comprehensive analysis of all the artists is far beyond the scope of this thesis; therefore, although referencing other authors, the discussion will highlight the artists that this author considers the “big five” of the Harlem Renaissance poets, based on the depth, breadth, and lasting influence of their work: James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen. Using historian Carter G. Woodson’s analysis (presented in Chapter 2) as the backdrop, the third division of this chapter will focus on the reasons that some Harlem Renaissance artists challenged Christianity as a viable option for African Americans. It will also present works that demonstrate their disdain for and disappointment in the theology.

### **Religious, Educational, and Familial Background**

Understanding the social class, education, and religious background of the Renaissance artists is integral to understanding the way that Christianity was portrayed in their works. A look at the background of many important figures of the Harlem Renaissance gives evidence of several shared themes. Most of them were middle-class socially and economically, and many were educated at some of the best schools in the country. A large percentage of them experienced a family heritage of religious upbringing; yet, there was another group of artists who were alienated from one or both parents. Also, a musical background was not uncommon. And, for the most part, they came from sophisticated, urban communities that had not been entrenched in slavery.

Youth was another common attribute of many Renaissance artists. With a few notable exceptions (James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset), most were fairly young during the period, either in their twenties or early thirties. Alain Locke’s essay “Negro

Youth Speaks” in his anthology *The New Negro*, applauds the gifts that the younger generation brings in expressing the heart of a people. One of those young artists, Langston Hughes, paints an optimistic picture of the future from the advantage of “Youth.”

We have tomorrow  
Bright before us  
Like a flame.

Yesterday  
A night-gone-thing,  
A sun-down name.

And dawn-today  
Broad arch above the road we came

We march!<sup>4</sup>

Hughes at once announces the demise of the old and the dawning of the new. However, the somewhat older professor and philosopher Alain Locke also acknowledges the specific challenges that young writers face in creating their art: “The artistic problem of the Young Negro has not been so much that of acquiring the outer mastery of form and technique as that of *achieving an inner mastery of mood and spirit* (emphasis added).”<sup>5</sup> Reconciling the head knowledge with the heart knowledge is a necessary synthesis for spiritual maturity. The young artists had plenty of information about Christianity, but perhaps, in accord with Locke’s comment, they lacked the means to fully appreciate and apply it.

Claude McKay comments in his poem “Prayer,” written in 1920, on the important role that youth played in shaping how he (and perhaps other young artists)

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<sup>4</sup> Langston Hughes, “Youth,” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994; First Vintage Classics Edition, 1995), 39.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Locke, “Negro Youth Speaks,” in Alain Locke, ed. *The New Negro* (1925; First Touchstone Edition, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 24.

perceived and operated within their world. “The wild and fiery passion of my youth consumes my soul; / In agony I turn to thee [God] for truth and self-control.”<sup>6</sup> While embracing the unabashed energy of youth, McKay also acknowledged that such passion could be devastating, and that he needed to seek a higher source to see his situation clearly and to gain the temperance that he could not produce in and of himself.

Many artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance had close ties to the Christian church. Bessie Smith was “one of seven children of a Baptist preacher . . . .”<sup>7</sup> Both of her parents had died by the time she was 8 years old. Thomas ‘Fats’ Waller “played a rambunctious piano at Connie’s [a famous Harlem nightclub]. Waller’s father was the deacon at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and his mother was the organist.”<sup>8</sup> Paul Robeson’s father was former slave and college graduate who also worked as a minister. Archibald Motley, who was educated at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, grew up attending the Oliver Baptist Church in Chicago.

The literary participants in the Harlem Renaissance also shared a high degree of education and exposure to religious life. Many had a religious family background; others received most of their formal training at schools founded by Christian organizations with some degree of Christian-based curriculum. To give one example, Langston Hughes was educated at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, a college and theological seminary found by Presbyterian minister John Dickey. According to Hughes, Dickey preached, “A race enlightened in the knowledge of God will

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<sup>6</sup> Claude McKay, *Complete Poems – Claude McKay*, ed. William J. Maxwell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 180.

<sup>7</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *The African American Odyssey*, 3d ed., Combined Volume (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 450.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

eventually be free. Kindle the light of religious knowledge. It will surely light them to an everlasting position among the people of the earth.”<sup>9</sup>

Table 3.1 presents a partial list of Harlem Renaissance authors and their educational/religious affiliations.

What influence might this extensive education have had on these individuals’ relationships with Christianity? It has been proposed that people who have a high degree of formal American education do little to develop the indigenous Black church. In his book *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, historian Carter G. Woodson stated, “. . . the more education these Negroes undergo the less comfort they seem to find in these evangelical groups.”<sup>10</sup> Woodson decries their acceptance of the pagan philosophy taught to them in these institutions; he later comments on the effect of the false preachers, “The ‘highly educated’ Negroes who know better than to follow these unprincipled men have abandoned these popular churches.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is sometimes difficult for people who put their confidence in their education to fully appreciate the things of God.<sup>12</sup>

Several of the artists give vivid depictions of their early encounters with Christianity and things spiritual. Zora Neale Hurston tells of her immersion in the church and the appreciation she had for its trappings:

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<sup>9</sup>Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), 279.

<sup>10</sup>Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, 10<sup>th</sup> printing (The Associated Publishers, 1933; Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, Inc., 1998), 52.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>12</sup>This observation is consistent with the teachings of 1 Cor. 2: 12-14—“Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, **not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth** (emphasis added), but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Table 3.1 Educational and Religious Backgrounds of Major Harlem Renaissance  
Artists

Artist	Education	Religious Heritage/Background
Countee Cullen, born 1903	New York University, Harvard University	Adoptive father was pastor of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church
Claude McKay, born 1889	Educated by brother, Mt. Zion Church, Tuskegee, Kansas State College	Father a pious Christian; brother a lay preacher; mother died when he was 20
Rudolph Fisher, born 1897	Brown University (Phi Beta Kappa), Howard University Medical School	Father was Baptist minister Reverend John Wesley Fisher
Langston Hughes, born 1902	Columbia University, Lincoln University	Abandoned by father; faked salvation experience while living with family friends
James Weldon Johnson, born 1871	Atlanta University, Columbia University	Grandmother a tireless church worker. Underwent salvation experience at age 9; later declared himself an agnostic
Arna Bontemps, born 1902	Pacific Union College (Adventist)	Father a lay minister (and jazz trombonist)
Zora Neale Hurston, born 1891	Howard University, Barnard College, Columbia University	Father a minister and unfaithful husband; lost mother at 13
Jessie Fauset, born 1884	Cornell University (Phi Beta Kappa)	Father an AME minister
Nella Larsen, born 1891	Fisk, University of Copenhagen, Lincoln School for Nurses	Father died when she was two years old
Richard Nugent, born 1906		Middle-class family
Jean Toomer, born 1894	University of Wisconsin, City College of New York	Father abandoned him – later raised by grandparents. Proponent of Gurdjieff Unitism, Quakers

Table 3.1 (Continued)

Artist	Education	Religious Heritage/Background
Wallace Thurman, born 1902	University of Utah, University of Southern California	Estranged from father almost first 30 years of his life
Eric Walrond, born 1898	City College of New York, Columbia University	Parents separated shortly after his birth
Dorothy West, born 1907	Boston University, Columbia School of Journalism	Upper middle class family
Charles Johnson, born 1893	Virginia Union University, University of Chicago	Father pastor of Baptist church
Aaron Douglas, born 1899	University of Nebraska	
Waring Cuney, born 1906	Lincoln University, Howard University	
Sterling Brown, born 1901	Williams, Harvard	Taught at Virginia Seminary for 3 years
Paul Robeson, born 1898	Rutgers University, Columbia University	Father a minister
John Matheus, born 1887	Columbia University	
Fenton Johnson, born 1888	Northwestern University, University of Chicago	

Sources: Data from Aberjhani and Sandra L West, *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2003); Barbara Bigelow, ed., *Contemporary Black Biography* (Detroit, Mich., 1994); Arnold Rampersad, ed., *The Oxford Anthology of African American Poetry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).



As I told you before, I had been pitched head-foremost into the Baptist Church when I was born. I had heard the singing, the preaching and the prayers. They were a part of me. But on the concert stage, I always heard songs called spirituals sung and applauded as Negro music, and I wondered what would happen if a white audience ever heard a real spiritual. To me, what the Negroes did in Macedonia Baptist Church was finer than anything that any trained composer had done to the folk-songs.<sup>13</sup>

Hurston also shares descriptions of the “supernatural” visions that she experienced as a young girl and the extraordinarily adult insight they afforded her. Her first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, tells the story of a Baptist preacher and his repeated infidelities; the book is thought to be loosely based on her father. So while Hurston could appreciate the art and power of Christianity, the discrepancy between the Word preached and the Word practiced obviously had a significant influence on her writings.

Jean Toomer was exposed to an early model of Christian life in the home with his mother and grandfather, his father having deserted the family prior to his birth. (Several of the stories in his innovative book *Cane*, published in 1923, depict the fragile strength and beauty of women who have been abandoned, either spiritually or physically.) Prior to writing *Cane*, and following a stint as a socialist, Toomer “immersed himself in Buddhist philosophy, Eastern teachings, Christian Scriptures, and occultism.”<sup>14</sup> Possibly contributing to his confusion as a young man was his status as a very light-skinned mulatto who could pass for white; indeed, he lived the first 14 years of his life among the white group. Several months served as a principal of a school in Georgia afforded him the life-changing opportunity to taste of the soil of the South; the rich imagery and sensuousness of *Cane* is the result of this experience.

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<sup>13</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *I Love Myself When I am Laughing . . . and then again, when I am looking mean and impressive*, ed. Alice Walker (New York: The Feminist Press, City University of New York, 1979), 68.

<sup>14</sup> Darwin Turner, introduction to the 1975 Edition of *Cane* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 128.

Toomer spent the majority of his adult life seeking spiritual fulfillment.

Though raised in a Christian family in Jamaica (his father was a senior deacon of the church), as a young man Claude McKay gained “. . . a somewhat skeptical attitude toward religion encouraged by his older brother.”<sup>15</sup> McKay’s father also instilled in him strong racial pride, intensified by his reading of *The Souls of Black Folk*. As part of the great southern and Caribbean migration of Black people to the northern American states, McKay eventually came to Harlem where he was profoundly influenced by the lives of urban working class Black people. In his own words, “. . . their spontaneous ways of acting and living for the moment, the physical and sensuous delights, the loose freedom in contrast to the definite peasant pattern by which I had been raised—all served to feed the riotous sentiments smoldering in me and cut me finally adrift from the fixed moorings my mind had been led to respect, but to which my heart had never held.”<sup>16</sup> McKay thus explained his long-term temporary abandonment of the religion of his youth, though he converted to Catholicism later in life.

Langston Hughes described a beloved couple he lived with as a young boy: “Auntie Reed was a Christian and made me go to church and Sunday School every Sunday. But Uncle Reed was a sinner and never went to church as long as he lived, nor cared anything about it. . . . But both of them were very good and kind—the one who went to church and the one who didn’t. And no doubt from them I learned to like both Christians and sinners equally well.”<sup>17</sup> While staying with the Reeds when he was twelve years old, Hughes experienced a false “salvation” event that led to years of guilt and attempts at retribution:

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<sup>15</sup> Gates and McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 980.

<sup>16</sup> McKay, “A Negro to His Critics,” quoted in William Maxwell’s Introduction to *Claude McKay, Complete Poems*, xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), 18.

My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul. I believed her. I had heard a great many old people say the same thing and it seemed to me they ought to know. So I sat there calmly in the hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite the strenuous efforts of the preacher and the congregation, Hughes’ extended time on the mourners’ bench left him still waiting for Jesus. So he got up from the bench in a false confession of salvation at which the whole church rejoiced, but at which Hughes cried through the night:

That night, for the last time in my life but one—for I was a big boy twelve years old—I cried. I cried, in bed alone, and couldn’t stop. I buried my head under the quilts, but my aunt heard me. She woke up and told my uncle I was crying because the Holy Ghost had come into my life, and because I had seen Jesus. But I was really crying because I couldn’t bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn’t seen Jesus, and that now I didn’t believe there was a Jesus any more, since he didn’t come to help me.<sup>19</sup>

In his introduction to Hughes’ first autobiography, Arnold Rampersad comments, “His disappointment at Jesus merely epitomizes his disappointment at all those—notably his parents—who had not come to save him from loneliness and abandonment.”<sup>20</sup>

Hughes went on to create in his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, a Black family headed by a strong Christian matriarch (like Auntie Reed), a rebellious daughter in stark contrast to a sanctimonious one, and an innocently questioning grandson (obviously representing Hughes himself) through whose voice the story is told. The rural community in which they lived was largely shaped by Christian values.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Rampersad, introduction to *The Big Sea*, xxii.

I wanted to write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West, about people like those I had known in Kansas. But mine was not a typical Negro family. My grandmother never took in washing or worked in service or went much to church...For purposes of the novel, however, I created around myself what seemed to me a family more typical of Negro life in Kansas than my own had been.<sup>21</sup>

*Not Without Laughter*, though fictional, was largely inspired by Hughes' real life. Sandy, the young protagonist in the novel, was abandoned by both of his parents. And although Hughes, like Sandy, did not experience a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he could not deny the powerful influence of Christianity on the black family.

Hughes expresses uncertainty about his personal religious faith in his short poem "Prayer [1]." But even his questioning is solidly in the context of traditional Christianity, bringing to mind the example of Jesus Christ who, as taught by the Christian faith, bore the sins of the whole world and wore a crown of thorns at his crucifixion.

I ask you this:  
Which way to go?  
I ask you this:  
Which sin to bear?  
Which crown to put  
Upon my hair?  
I do not know,  
Lord God,  
I do not know."<sup>22</sup>

James Weldon Johnson depicts in his autobiography a "salvation" experience similar to that of Langston Hughes, complete with the mourning bench and the saints praying and singing and petitioning God to lead the young sinners to repentance. Only nine years old at the time of the event, Johnson shares his memory of being brought

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<sup>21</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 304.

<sup>22</sup> Hughes, "Prayer," *Collected Poems*, 51.

into membership in the church: “I was lifted up, transported. The vision I had recounted came back a reality. I felt myself, like young Samuel, the son of Hannah, dedicated to the service of God.”<sup>23</sup> At this point, Johnson appears to have truly been “born again.” In later years, he declares himself an agnostic, unable to know the reality of God. He did, however, acknowledge the following in his autobiography: “I think that the teachings of Jesus Christ embody the loftiest ethical and spiritual concepts that human mind has yet borne.”<sup>24</sup> Johnson’s best-known work, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (written in 1900), clearly demonstrates reverence for the God “who has brought us thus far on the way.”<sup>25</sup>

Countee Cullen is the Renaissance artist perhaps best known for using Christian themes in his writing. Many of his poems were about his personal relationship with God; he also questioned God’s perspective and seeming inaction concerning the conditions of African Americans. Cullen described his life with his religious adoptive parents as an ongoing struggle of “reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan inclination.”<sup>26</sup> In his first book of poetry, Cullen published the following “Pagan Prayer,” in which he voiced his desire for the faith of his people to be realized:

Not for myself I make this prayer,  
But for this race of mine  
That stretches forth from shadowed places  
Dark hands for bread and wine.

For me, my heart is pagan mad,  
My feet are never still,  
But give him hearths to keep them warm  
In homes high on a hill.

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<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*. 28.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

<sup>25</sup> Hine, Hine, and Harrold, *The African American Odyssey*, 436.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Gates and McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology*. 1303.

For me, my faith lies fallowing,  
I bow not till I see,  
But these are humble and believe;  
Bless their credulity.

For me, I pay my debts in kind,  
And see no better way,  
Bless these who turn the other cheek  
For love of you, and pray.

Our Father, God; our Brother, Christ,  
Or are we bastard kin,  
That to our complaints your ears are closed,  
Your doors barred from within?

Our Father God; our Brother Christ,  
Retrieve my race again;  
So shall you compass this black sheep,  
This pagan heart. Amen.<sup>27</sup>

Cullen calls himself a black sheep, one who has not been as successful as the rest of the fold in following the voice of the Shepherd. He clearly implies that the restoration of his people ["retrieve my race again"] is the means and the evidence by which he will be convinced to truly believe in the Christian God. In his poem "Heritage," Cullen perhaps best expresses the duality that he feels, speaking of his conversion to Christianity as high-priced, and wishing the God he served were Black.<sup>28</sup>

The ambivalent portrayal of Christianity by some Harlem Renaissance artists has its roots in several factors. It appears that a similar dual-consciousness concerning Christianity and African Americans existed in the minds of the writers of the period such as DuBois described in *The Souls of Black Folk* about being American and Black. To a large degree, this dilemma manifested itself as ambivalence or outright

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<sup>27</sup> Countee Cullen, "Pagan Prayer," *My Soul's High Song—The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen*, ed. Gerald Early (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 93.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

rejection of traditional Christian models. There can be no doubt that many Renaissance writers had difficulty in reconciling the knowledge they had gained in their Christian upbringing and education with the reality they experienced in American society and the Christianity they saw practiced in both Black and white churches. It is evident in their works, from the gentle ambivalence of Countee Cullen to the more overt rejection of Langston Hughes.

In a 1923 speech to the League of Youth in New York, Cullen commented on ways in which the “New Negro” was evolving, especially concerning his relationship with God:

Then the New Negro is changing somewhat in his attitude toward the Deity. I would not have you misconstrue this statement. I do not mean that he is becoming less reverent, but that he is becoming less dependent. . . . The young Negro of today, while he realizes that religious fervor is a good thing for any people, and while he realizes that it and the Negro are fairly inseparable, also realizes that where it exists in excess it breeds stagnation, and passive acquiescence, where a little active resistance would work better results. . . . There is such a thing as working out one’s own soul’s salvation. And that is what the New Negro intends to do.<sup>29</sup>

However, even in the writings of Hughes, McKay, and Cullen, the break with tradition was not always clearly delineated. The dual-consciousness of Black people described by DuBois extended far into the twentieth century and was apparent even, and sometimes especially, in the works of the “New Negro.” For example, Langston Hughes often expressed a tone of rejection regarding Christianity in his writings. Yet he ended his novel *Not Without Laughter* with an affirmation of the powerful expression of faith when the young protagonist, Sandy, describes the singing emanating from a Chicago church: “It’s beautiful! Sandy cried—for vibrant and steady like a stream of living faith, their song filled the whole night.”<sup>30</sup> And even

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<sup>29</sup> Cullen, “The League of Youth Address,” *My Soul’s High Song*, 548.

<sup>30</sup> Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 299.

Hughes' first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, used traditional Biblical imagery in the title, evoking images of a fisherman casting his net in the sea of life.

Historian Nathan Huggins wrote the following on the subject of African Americans' divergence from the traditional Christian faith and how it manifested in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance:

To the Afro-American in the 1920s, Christianity had a variety of faces. Institutionalized, it was a church and one of the few institutional forms through which blacks could work, and yet it was a means of exploiting poor blacks to its own profit and to that of its preachers. Ideologically, it was a doctrine and a set of values, shared by the dominant society, against which America and whites could be held to account, and yet it counsel[ed] forbearance and seemed a moral obligation only to the weak. Spiritually, it had provided the conduit for the voiced hopes and feelings of blacks from their first arrival in America, and yet it was the way to escape to other-worldly preoccupations. The dilemmas, therefore, were torturous and troubling. To find a racial self-respect meant for Afro-Americans to honor the religious expression and imagination of their people. But to be modern—to be a New Negro—would necessitate a new and critical look at Christianity.

Thus, James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston are able to celebrate the power of Christianity in the folk idiom. But Countee Cullen (whose adoptive father was a Methodist minister) often used Christian themes only to show his deep, personal ambivalence. For others, like Waring Cuney, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Helene Johnson, Christianity was a target for satire.<sup>31</sup>

### **Christianity Reflected in Harlem Renaissance Literature**

Many Harlem Renaissance artists found it difficult to make a distinct break with the faith of their fathers. Indeed, the traditional ethnic preferences of African American culture had migrated to Harlem along with the people. To cite one example, Darlene Clark Hine describes jazz as having “its origins in New Orleans, but it drew

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<sup>31</sup> Nathan Huggins, ed., *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 341.



on ragtime and spirituals as it moved up the Mississippi River to Kansas City and Chicago on its way to Harlem.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the intrinsic value of the culture was evident even in the creation of the new aesthetic standards. And even the most rebellious spirit sometimes found it needful to resort to the ways of the past. With all of the freedom that Harlem had to offer for the flesh, it just was not enough to satisfy the soul.

According to David Levering Lewis:

Inevitably, the migrating peasant had brought his religious fundamentalism and evangelical fervor to Harlem, where they both preserved the old, reassuring ways and served as a psychological safety net in his struggles with the new ways. . . . There came moments, even in the lives of the Talented Tenth, when there was need of the ol’ time religion, that enduring syncretism of Protestant liturgy and pagan life.<sup>33</sup>

Some artists chose to portray aspects of Christianity in their works simply because it was such a vital and vibrant part of African American life. In discussing the request to develop illustrations for *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, artist Aaron Douglas commented in an interview, “. . . I was and am very much impressed with the enormous power, spiritual power that’s behind Negro life and it’s . . . if it can be mined, it’s a gold mine if you can write or draw it. . . .”<sup>34</sup>

A number of Renaissance writers did indeed decide to tap this deep well of spiritual power as subject matter for their art. Table 2.2 in Chapter 2 presented a list of Biblical Scripture references correlated with themes from the philosophy of Marcus Garvey. Many of these Scriptures also are reflected in various ways in the works of Harlem Renaissance writers. The succeeding discussions will categorically relate these and other Scriptures to specific works in which they are manifested.

*God’s Relationship with Humans—Jesus as Savior, Deliverer, Righteous Judge, and*

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<sup>32</sup> Hine, Hine, and Harrold, *African American Odyssey*, 418.

<sup>33</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 221.

<sup>34</sup> Aaron Douglas, “Chats about the Harlem Renaissance,” in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 123.

### *Source of Hope*

The Bible stories have been set forth in various ways in a number of Harlem Renaissance works. They had special meaning for African Americans in the 1920s, many of whom had survived slavery, the hope and downfall of Reconstruction, and were yet relegated to what seemed like permanent second-class status in this society.

Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm, authors of *What Color Is Your God?*, made the following statement concerning the attitude of God towards humans: “In addition to affirming the unity of humanity, the biblical teaching concerning creation also supports the worth of the individual and his right to survive.”<sup>35</sup> Such an interpretation was crucial for African Americans in viewing their relationship with God and determining their self-worth and their rightful place in the world.

A brief synopsis of the central ideas at the core of the Bible story is as follows: In the beginning, God created everything, including man, and gave man dominion over all that He had created on earth. A jealous angel, the devil, rebelled in heaven; man sinned on earth and was condemned to death. God still loved man, and gave his Son Jesus to be atonement for man’s sins, that those who would believe on Him would not perish, but have everlasting life. The devil still works to keep man in sin, but God’s will is that all men will yield to Him. Table 3.2 presents samples of Biblical Scriptures that represent themes that could be associated with literature by writers of the Renaissance.

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<sup>35</sup> Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm, *What Color Is Your God?* (New York: Citadel Press, 1988; New York: Carol Publishing Group Edition, 1995), 92.

Table 3.2 Scriptures Revealing the God of the Bible in Relationship to Humans

Scripture Reference	Text	Theme
Gen. 1:7	And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.	God is the creator of all men.
John 14:6	I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me.	Jesus Christ is the truth and giver of true life.
John 8:32,36	And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. . . . If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.	The truth of Jesus brings freedom of the mind.
Gal. 5:1	Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.	Once free, stay free.
Rom. 6:23	For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.	Evildoers will be repaid for their sins; good will be rewarded.
Rom. 5:20b	But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.	Good will ultimately win over evil.
Rom. 12:19	Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.	God is the judge of all.
Matt. 19:30	The last shall be first.	God will turn the situation around.
Deut. 30:19	I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed shall live.	God will reward those who live according to His word.
John 14:3	And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.	Those who believe will receive everlasting life with God in heaven.

This segment will examine how elements of these themes, including the person and attributes of Jesus/God, are portrayed in selected prose, but especially the poetry, of the Harlem Renaissance. Relevant, repeated themes and characterizations are God as the creator/giver of life, the deliverer/sustainer/savior of life, and the judge/authority of life. Other Biblical characters (such as Moses, Daniel, Belshazzar, and Judas) are also represented in the poetry, either as servants or enemies of God.

James Weldon Johnson exquisitely renders traditional Bible stories and sermons in verse that is reminiscent of the spirituals. His *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, is an ingenious work of charming yet powerful simplicity. Johnson describes a trombone as “the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice—and with greater amplitude.”<sup>36</sup> This comparison reveals Johnson’s great respect for the awesome gift of the Black preacher.

The seven sermons selected by Johnson beautifully portray traditional Bible stories that cover God’s relationship with humans from the beginning to the end:

“The Creation”

“The Prodigal Son”

“Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon”

“Noah Built the Ark”

“The Crucifixion”

“Let My People Go”

“The Judgment Day”

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<sup>36</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *James Weldon Johnson: Complete Poems* (The Viking Press, Inc., 1927; New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 9.

In these poems, Johnson retold Biblical stories in ways that had special significance for African Americans. Sociologist and former *Opportunity* editor Charles Johnson said of James Weldon Johnson:

His Negro sermons symbolized the transition from the folk idiom to conscious artistic expression. In naïve, non-dialect speech, they blend the rich imagery of the uneducated Negro minister with the finished skill of a cultured Negro poet. In a curiously fascinating way both style and content bespoke the meeting and parting of the old and new in Negro life in America.<sup>37</sup>

In “The Creation,” Johnson paints vibrant images of an Almighty God as He fashions the universe and all that dwell within. At the end of the poem, Johnson masterfully links the Black race as being with God from the beginning:

This Great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeled down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,  
And man became a living soul.  
Amen. Amen.<sup>38</sup>

With the figure of “a mammy bending over her baby,” Johnson deftly assigns to Black people the position of those first created in the image of God. The “mammy” character also brings to mind one who gives love and sustains life. And God of the creation kneeled and worked in the dust, toiling in the soil just like the slaves.

Johnson’s “Prayer at Sunrise” affirms the role of God as not only the Source, but also the Sustainer of all life. The second and final verse of the poem is rendered here:

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<sup>37</sup> Charles S. Johnson, “The Negro Renaissance and Its Significance,” reprinted in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 209.

<sup>38</sup> J. Johnson, “The Creation,” *Complete Poems*, 17.

O greater Maker of this Thy great sun,  
Give me the strength the one day's race to run;  
Fill me with light, fill me with sun-like strength;  
Fill me with joy to rob the day its length.  
Light from within, light that will outward shine,  
Strength to make strong some weaker heart than mine,  
Joy to make glad each soul that feels its touch;  
Great Father of the sun, I ask this much.<sup>39</sup>

In poems such as the sermons in *God's Trombones* and several of Hughes' selections, some Renaissance poets portray great personal intimacy between God and his chosen ones. Here is one example in Hughes' "Ma Lord":

Ma Lord ain't no stuck-up man.  
Ma Lord, he ain't proud.  
When he goes a-walkin  
He gives me his hand.  
"You ma friend," he 'lowed.

Ma Lord knowed what it was to work.  
He knowed how to pray.  
Ma Lord's life was trouble, too,  
Trouble ever day.

Ma Lord ain't no stuck-up man.  
He's a friend o' mine.  
When He went to heaben,  
His soul on fire,  
He tole me I was gwine.  
He said, "Sho you'll come wid Me  
An' be ma friend through eternity."<sup>40</sup>

Again, just as the God of "The Creation" toiled over the clay, so did "Ma Lord" know what it was to work and suffer, personally identifying with the condition of His people. The poem relates to God's understanding of and empathy with their situation; the last several lines about going with the Lord to heaven point to His ultimate desire to deliver them from their situation.

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<sup>39</sup> J. Johnson, "Prayer at Sunrise," *Complete Poems*, 81.

<sup>40</sup> Hughes, "Ma Lord," *Complete Poems*, 107.

Both Johnson's and Hughes' use of the vernacular indicate that the ideas herein expressed are commonly spoken of and commonly accepted by the people of their time. The language may also suggest their desire to place some personal distance between the author and the subject. The effect is that these poems reflect more their observations and interpretations of the beliefs of a people rather than their own private experience and convictions.

Johnson's "Let My People Go" is the sermonized version of the traditional spiritual "Go Down Moses" (way down in Egypt-land—Tell Old Pharaoh—Let My People Go!). It is a cry from the heart of man beseeching God to end the suffering of His people. Through the song and through the sermon, African Americans expressed their longing for God to change their situation and affirmed their belief that it would be done, just as it had been done for the Israelites.

"The Judgment Day," Johnson's rendition of that stirring sermon in *God's Trombones*, graphically depicts the contrasting futures that await saints and sinners. He makes it clear that no one is free of the judgment of God, and he points out the power of choice that each individual has in determining his fate:

Sinner, oh, sinner,  
Where will you stand  
In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?<sup>41</sup>

Langston Hughes produced a similarly titled poem during this period about the final judgment of God in the lives of men. "Judgment Day" is told from the point of view of an individual who has ascended into the heavens to receive resurrected life. The implication is that a person who lives a godly life can have hope and assurance of his own eternal life, bought by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

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<sup>41</sup> J. Johnson, "The Judgment Day," *Complete Poems*, 44.

They put ma body in the ground,  
Ma soul went flying o' the town,

Went flyin' to the stars an' moon  
A-shoutin', God, I's comin' soon.

O Jesus!

Lord in heaven,  
Crown on His head,  
Says don't be 'fraid  
Cause you ain't dead.

Kind Jesus!

An' now I'm settin' clean an' bright  
In the sweet o' ma Lord's sight—  
Clean an' bright,  
Clean an' bright.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to the heaven-bound character of “Ma Lord,” several other poems written by Hughes spoke of the sure knowledge of evil recompense for a wayward life. The selections that follow illustrate this point of view. Note the title of the poem “Fire,” which is the same name given to the single-issued magazine that Hughes and others produced as representative of every generation’s intense desire to defy tradition and “do its own thing.”

Fire,  
Fire, Lord!  
Fire gonna burn ma soul!

I ain't been good,  
I ain't been clean—  
I been stinkin', low-down, mean.

Fire,  
Fire Lord!  
Fire gonna burn ma soul!

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<sup>42</sup> Hughes, “Judgment Day,” *Collected Poems*, 71.



Tell me, brother,  
Do you believe  
If you wanta go to heaben  
Got to moan an' grieve?

Fire,  
Fire, Lord!  
Fire gonna burn ma soul!

I been stealin',  
Been tellin' lies,  
Had more women  
Than Pharaoh had wives.

Fire,  
Fire, Lord!  
Fire gonna burn ma soul!<sup>43</sup>

In "Angels Wings," Hughes juxtaposes the purity of the angels' paraphernalia with the mud-stained trappings of the sinner, again using the imagery of fire, which can be either a purifying or destroying agent:

The angels wings is white as snow,  
O, white as snow,  
    White  
        as  
            snow.  
The angels wings is white as snow,  
    But I drug ma wings  
In the dirty mire.  
    O, I drug ma wings  
    All through the fire.  
But the angels wings is white as snow,  
    White  
        as  
            snow.<sup>44</sup>

Hughes finds little need for embellishment, but puts forth a simple plea for God's mercy in "Sinner":

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<sup>43</sup> Hughes, "Fire," *Collected Poems*, 117.

<sup>44</sup> Hughes, "Angels Wings," *Collected Poems*, 118.

Have mercy, Lord!

Po' an black  
An' humble an' lonesome  
An a sinner in yo' sight

Have mercy, Lord!<sup>45</sup>

The God of judgment and retribution may also be implied in Zora Neale Hurston's folk story "Spunk." This second-prize winner of the 1925 *Opportunity* contest focused on the fate of a weak married man (Joe) who took revenge on a man (Spunk) cheating with his wife. Following the death of Spunk, reportedly caused by the spirit of Joe whom he had killed earlier, townsman Elijah (name of an Old Testament prophet) said, "If spirits kin fight, there's a powerful tussle goin' on somewhere ovah Jordan 'cause Ah b'leeve Joe's ready for Spunk an' ain't skeered any more—yas, Ah b'leeve Joe pushed 'im mahself."<sup>46</sup> The story can be seen as mixing an African belief in spirits and the supernatural with the righteous judgment of God.

In 1920, Claude McKay wrote "A Prayer" in the voice of a young person asking for God's help as he makes his way through life.

'Mid the discordant noises of the day I hear thee calling;  
I stumble as I fare along Earth's way; keep me from falling.

Mine eyes are open but they cannot see for gloom of night;  
I can no more than lift my heart to thee for inward light

The wild and fiery passion of my youth consumes my soul;  
In agony I turn to thee for truth and self-control.

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<sup>45</sup> Hughes, "Sinner," *Collected Poems*, 119.

<sup>46</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "Spunk," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke, 111.

For Passion and all the pleasures it can give will die the death;  
But this of me eternally must live, thy borrowed breath.

'Mid the discordant noises of the day I hear thee calling;  
I stumble as I fare along Earth's way; keep me from falling.<sup>47</sup>

Another set of verses by Renaissance authors give tribute to the Christ figure specifically. Countee Cullen's epic poem, "The Black Christ," relates the experience of the brother of a new-age "Son of God," employing images of the resurrection described in the Bible as taking place some 2,000 years ago.<sup>48</sup> The protagonist uses many examples of Biblical imagery and characterizations in telling his story. One is the example of Jacob, who fought the angel through the night and won ("We cry for angels; yet wherefore, / Who raise no Jacobs any more?"). Another is Job, who experienced great personal affliction and loss, but God restored him (the author calls his mother "Job's sister, who, though suffering, relates to her children the tale of the Israelites, comparing their situation to the plight and the hope of African Americans ("Once there had been somewhere as now / A people harried, low in the dust; / But such had been their utter trust/In Heaven and its field of stars / That they had broken down their bars, / And walked across a parted sea / Praising His name who set them free. . . .").

The sons found it difficult to believe their mother's stories, but the mother remained steadfast in her faith, needing no physical confirmation of its reality such as that received by the Apostle Paul (Acts 9:3-6) and Thomas, the doubting disciple (John 20:24-29).<sup>49</sup> This poem speaks again to the impossibility of trying to reconcile

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<sup>47</sup> Claude McKay, "A Prayer," in *Complete Poems – Claude McKay*, William J. Maxwell, ed. (Urbana, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 180.

<sup>48</sup> Cullen, "The Black Christ," *My Soul's High Song*, 207-236.

<sup>49</sup> Acts 9:3-6 describes Paul's Damascus Road experience, where Jesus Christ spoke to him directly. "Doubting Thomas" was the disciple who said in the Book of John that he would not believe that Jesus had been resurrected until he could personally view the nail prints and put his hands in the wounds where Jesus had been pierced.

spiritual things with the human mind alone. The author tries to express and understand the incongruity.

*Two brothers have I had on earth,  
One of spirit, one of sod;  
My mother suckled one at birth,  
One was the Son of God.*

Since that befell which came to me,  
Since I was singled out to be,  
Upon a wheel of mockery,  
The **pattern of a new faith** [emphasis added] spun;  
I never doubt that once the sun  
For respite stopped in Gibeon,  
Or that a Man I could not know  
Two thousand ageless years ago,  
To shape my profit by His loss,  
Bought my redemption on a cross.<sup>50</sup>

The brother of the protagonist was one who, like Jesus Christ, would not stand for injustice; he postured himself as one “proud black man” who would avenge his people. For his stance, and like others who sacrificed themselves thus, he was to share a similar fate to Jesus:

How Calvary in Palestine,  
Extending down to me and mine,  
Was but the first leaf in a line  
Of trees on which a Man should swing  
World without end, in suffering  
For all men’s healing, let me sing.

Later, upon witnessing his brother’s apparent resurrection after being lynched, the author remarks on the infallible proof of God’s love demonstrated through the resurrection of the dead:

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<sup>50</sup> Cullen, “The Black Christ,” *My Soul’s High Song*, 209.

Now have we seen beyond degree  
That love which has no boundary;  
Our eyes have looked on Calvary.<sup>51</sup>

In the poem “Judas Iscariot,” Cullen gives a sympathetic portrait of a man who loved Christ so much that he willingly accepted his role as traitor so that God’s plan of redemption could be carried out in the earth:

Then Judas in his hot desire  
Said, “Give me what you will.”  
Christ spoke to him with words of fire,  
“Then, Judas, you must kill  
One whom you love, One who loves you  
As only God’s son can:  
This is the work for you to do  
To save the creature man.”<sup>52</sup>

Harlem Renaissance writers such as Claude McKay succeeded in drawing upon the parallels between the lives of Biblical characters and the current condition of black people. In his poem “Baptism,” McKay conjures up the image of the three Hebrew boys entering the fiery furnace because they refused to dance to the king’s music (Dan. 3:15-27). Another figure (Jesus) was seen in the furnace with them, and they came out of the fire unscathed. McKay gives no direct reference to Jesus in his poem, but instead alludes to the purifying nature of fire.

Into the furnace let me go alone;  
.....  
Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,  
Transforming me into a shape of flame.  
I will come out, back to your world of tears,  
A stronger soul within a finer frame.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>52</sup> Cullen, “Judas Iscariot,” *Collected Writings*, 126.

<sup>53</sup> McKay, “Baptism,” *Complete Poems*, 177.

In the following poem, McKay refers to oppressed Black people as “sable Samsons” who would be empowered by God, as Samson was, to pull down the walls that bound them and be free (Judg. 16: 28-30):

Samson, the chosen Nazarite, who ruled  
The Jews for twenty years and judged their sins,  
Snared in the web of flesh, by woman fooled,  
Was captured by the hated Philistines.  
But God remembered him in his downfall  
And, in his blindness, gave him back his power,  
Which nobly used he, at his gaoler’s call,  
To save his soul in one grand crowning hour.  
*O sable Samsons* [emphasis mine], in white prisons bound,  
Wounded and blinded, in your hidden strength  
Put forth your swarthy hands: the pillars found,  
Strain mightily at them until at length  
The accursed walls, reared of your blood and tears,  
Come crashing, sounding freedom in your ears.<sup>54</sup>

Again, Blacks are compared to God’s chosen people who, though impotent for a time, would rise again to the greatness that He intended for them.

*Theme of Equality (One God, One Blood, One Spirit; No Respect of Persons)*

An extremely important aspect of Christian teachings appropriated by African Americans is the premise that all men are created equal. Table 3.3 presents Biblical Scriptures specifically related to the themes of equality and the brotherhood of man.

According to the Scriptures, Jesus extended great mercy and forgiveness when he was crucified, inviting a thief to be in heaven with him, and asking God the Father to forgive the people who killed him, “for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34-43).

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<sup>54</sup> McKay, “Samson,” *Complete Poems*, 139.

Table 3.3 Scriptures Relating Themes of Equality and the Brotherhood of Men

Scripture Reference	Text	Theme
Gal. 3:28-29	There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.	All men are not only equal, but as one in Christ Jesus, and entitled as heirs of God.
Genesis 1:26-27	And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . .and let them have dominion. . . .So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.	All men are created, with power, in the image and likeness of God.
Mark 16:15	Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.	Christianity is for all people.
Acts 17:26	And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.	God created all men and determined the time and place of our lives
Deut. 32:8	When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel.	God determined our dwelling place and the arena in which we are to live our lives.
Eph. 2:13-14	But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us.	Through Jesus, there is unity in the Body of Christ.
Rom. 2:10-11	But glory, honor, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile; For there is no respect of persons with God.	The statutes of God apply to all men equally.



Table 3.3 (Continued)

Scripture Reference	Text	Theme
1 Tim. 2:1-6	<p>I exhort, therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;</p> <p>For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.</p> <p>For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our savior;</p> <p>Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.</p> <p>For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;</p> <p>Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.</p>	<p>We must pray for all men, and salvation is available for all men.</p>
Rom. 2: 10-11	<p>But glory, honor and peace to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: For there is no respect of persons with God.</p>	<p>God recompenses to all men equally.</p>
Matt. 5:44-45	<p>But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;</p> <p>That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust.</p>	<p>God's mercy extends to all men.</p>

The following poem by Countee Cullen seems to capture an attitude similar to the teachings of Jesus Christ regarding forgiveness, mercy, and “doing to others as you would have them to do to you”:

Our flesh that was a battle-ground  
Shows now the morning-break;  
The ancient deities are downed  
For Thy eternal sake.  
Now that the past is left behind,  
Fling wide Thy garment’s hem  
To keep us one with Thee in mind,  
Thou Christ of Bethlehem.

The thorny wreath may ridge our brow,  
The spear may mar our side,  
And on white wood from a scented bough  
We may be crucified;  
Yet no assault the old gods make  
Upon our agony  
Shall swerve our footsteps from the wake  
Of Thine toward Calvary.

And if we hunger now and thirst,  
Grant our withholders may,  
When heaven’s constellations burst  
Upon Thy crowning day,  
Be fed by us, and given to see  
Thy mercy in our eyes,  
When Bethlehem and Calvary  
Are merged in Paradise.”<sup>55</sup>

Coming out of a period in their history that had offered such great, yet unmet promise, African Americans were naturally discouraged. It was essential to their own humanity to find and cling to something in their very spirits that reaffirmed their worth as individuals and as a people. As Sojourner Truth had said, “Am I not a woman?” so the African American poet now declared to the world, “I am a human being!” Thus, Cullen posed in “The Black Christ”:

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<sup>55</sup> Cullen, “The Litany of the Dark People,” *Collected Writings*, 147.

Tell them though they dispute this thing,  
This is the song that dead men sing:  
One spark of spirit God head gave  
To all alike, to sire and slave,  
From earth's red core to each white pole,  
This one identity of soul;<sup>56</sup>

Claude McKay joined the refrain with his introspective poem "I Know My Soul." The last line of the verse ("this narcotic thought) suggests the internal peace that comes as a result of knowing who one really is on the inside, despite external circumstances.

And if the sign may not be fully read  
If I can comprehend but not control  
I need not gloom my days with futile dread,  
Because I see a part and not the whole.  
Contemplating the strange, I'm comforted  
By this narcotic thought: I know my soul.<sup>57</sup>

In the short story "Fog," which won first prize in the *Opportunity* contest of 1925, John Matheus relates the internal spiritual struggle of naturally separated groups of Christians and non-Christians, of varying ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds, who are united by their mutual dire predicament on a streetcar crossing a bridge that was suddenly damaged in the fog.<sup>58</sup>

"The bridge has given way. God! The muddy water! The fog!  
Darkness. Death."  
These thoughts flashed spontaneously in the consciousness of the rough ignorant fellows, choking in the fumes of their strong tobacco, came to the garlic scented 'hunkies,' to the Italian Madonna, to the Sisters of Charity, to the lover boy and his lover girls, to the Negro youths, to the Jews thinking in Yiddish idioms, to the old Negro man and his wife and the Egyptian-faced girl, with the straightened African hair, even to the board motorman and the weary conductor.

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<sup>56</sup> Cullen, "The Black Christ," *Collected Writings*, 221.

<sup>57</sup> McKay, "I Know My Soul," *Complete Poems*, 174.

<sup>58</sup> Matheus, "Fog," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke, 85-95.

[And for the sinners in the group]  
All the unheeded, forgotten warnings of ranting preachers, all the prayers of simple black mothers, the Mercy-Seat, the Revival, too late.

But in the midst of all the turmoil, the elderly Black Christian woman, the nuns, and the Italian mother prayed:

The old woman began to sing in a high quavering minor key:  
'Lawdy, won't yo' ketch mah groan,  
O Lawdy, Lawdy, won't yo' ketch mah groan.'

This repeated plea, "Lawdy, won't yo' ketch mah groan," brings to mind the Christian teaching on praying in the Spirit. In the words of Rom. 8:26—"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but *the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings* [emphasis added] *which cannot be uttered.*"

Notice that the same fate befell all of the diverse peoples on the car: the sinners and the saints (Eccles. 9:2—"All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked . . ."). Miraculously, all on the car were able to escape, and the joy of their deliverance inspired the "rough, ignorant fellows" to ask the old woman to sing them a song and to request a prayer of thanksgiving for them all from the Sisters of Charity. The story ends:

The fog still crept from under the bed of the river and down from the lowering hills of West Virginia—dense, tenacious, stealthy, chilling, but from about the hearts and minds of some rough, unlettered men another fog had begun to lift.<sup>59</sup>

Matheus seems to suggest that when men begin to focus on their common humanity instead of their differences, they will begin to see clearly, with new vision.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 95.

*Celebration of African Beauty/Self as Created by God and Made in His Image*

Table 3.4 presents Scriptures that speak to the inherent beauty of all people, particularly the Black race. Celebration of self is an important theme of Harlem Renaissance literature.

In his poem “Heritage,” Countee Cullen gives an alluring portrayal of his African roots. However, he continues to express duality about his race, his country, and his religion. Cullen glorifies his natural heritage, yet seems to recognize the betrayal of his former service to heathen gods, actually bemoaning the cost of Christian conversion. He appears to be unaware of the Christian heritage of some Africans, or perhaps chose to ignore it in favor of a more exotic literary perspective. In the first verse of the poem, Cullen regales the reader with images drawn from an Africa as old as the Bible itself:

What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men, or regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?

Later, he declares:

My conversion came high-priced;  
I belong to Jesus Christ,  
Preacher of humility;  
Heathen gods are naught to me.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Cullen, “Heritage,” *My Soul’s High Song*, 104-108.

Table 3.4 Scriptures Supporting the Worth and Beauty of African People

Scripture Reference	Text	Theme
Gen. 1:26-27	And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . .and let them have dominion. . . .So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.	All men are created, with power, in the image and likeness of God.
Deut. 32:8	When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel.	God determined our dwelling place and the arena in which we are to live our lives.
Acts 17:26	And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.	God created all men and determined the time and place of our lives
Ps. 68:31	Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.	God affirms the royalty of Africans and their relationship with Him.
Song of Sol. 1:5	I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.	Black people are splendidly and exquisitely beautiful.
1 Pet. 2:9-10	But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.	God has chosen us to be royalty.
Rev. 1:6	And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father;	We are royal servants of God.

Cullen seems to find it difficult to reconcile the regal images of his ancestors with the humility he has been taught as a Christian. Yet he cannot forsake his God, even for a glorious history. However, incongruent as the two concepts (African and Christian) may have been to Cullen, they are not mutually exclusive, and Christianity does not teach them as such, as evidenced by the Scriptures in Table 3.4.

In “Black Majesty,” Cullen describes past generations of revolutionaries, linking their blackness and grandeur to the ideal of beauty:

These men were kings, albeit they were black  
Christophe and Dessalines and L’Ouverture;  
Their majesty has made me turn my back  
Upon a plaint I once shaped to endure. (plaint – lamentation, grief)  
.....  
‘Lo, I am dark, but comely,’ Sheba sings  
‘And we were black,’ three shades reply, ‘but kings.’<sup>61</sup>

The references to three Black kings may also allude to the three kings from the east who brought gifts to the Christ child at his birth (Matt. 2: 1, 11). Cullen acknowledges the unique role of another Black man in the plan of God for the salvation of man in his poem “Colors”: “Yea, he who helped Christ up Golgotha’s track, That Simon who did *not* deny, was black.”<sup>62</sup>

Claude McKay wrote “Exhortation: Summer, 1919,” following the end of World War I and the race riots that occurred throughout cities in America. He challenges the black peoples of the earth to arise from the lethargy that has overtaken them and come into the glory that should be theirs. The third verse of this poem reads:

Oh the night is sweet for sleeping, but the shining day’s for working;  
Sons of the seductive night, for your children’s children’s sake,  
From the deep primeval forests where the crouching leopard’s lurking,  
Lift your heavy-lidded eyes, Ethiopia! awake!<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., “Black Majesty,” 200-201.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>63</sup> McKay, “Exhortation: Summer, 1919,” *Complete Poems*, 176.

Messages from several Biblical passages are apparent in this verse. The first line, “Oh the night is sweet for sleeping, but the shining day’s for working,” evokes John 9:4-5—“I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day; the night cometh, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” According to Christian teachings, Jesus is the light by which man can clearly see the work that God has created him to do.

The second line, “Sons of the seductive night, [awake] for your children’s children’s sake,” is very powerful. The richness of the Biblical imagery in this verse is tremendous. The implication is, first, that Black people have been seduced by the things of darkness. Secondly, the notion that Black people must awake “for their children’s children sake” is not to be taken lightly, as witnessed by the awesome power of the following Scriptures. Central to the understanding of this verse are the following concepts: Black people can be viewed as modern-day Israelites, the Ten Commandments still apply, and God is an unchanging God.

Exod. 34:6-7—And the Lord passed by before him [Moses], and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,

Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; *visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children* [emphasis added], unto the third and to the fourth generation.

Deut. 4:25-26—When thou shalt beget children, and *children’s children* [emphasis added], and ye shall have remained long in the land, and shall corrupt yourselves, and make a graven image, or the likeness of any thing, and shall do evil in the sight of the Lord thy God, to provoke him to anger:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that ye shall soon utterly perish from off the land whereunto ye go over Jordan to possess it; ye shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall be utterly destroyed.



Prov. 13:22—*A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children* [emphasis added]; and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just.

Prov. 17:6—*Children's children are the crown of old men* [emphasis added]; and the glory of children are their fathers.

Jer. 2:8-9—The priest said not, Where is the Lord? And they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit.

Wherefore I will yet please [contend, as in bring charges against] with you, saith the Lord, and *with your children's children will I plead* [emphasis added].

The fourth line of McKay's "Exhortation," "Lift your heavy-lidded eyes, Ethiopia! awake!" is reminiscent of Eph. 5:14—"Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." The message is that if Black people would awake to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, He will give them the light that they need to live by. (John 1: 9—"That [Jesus] was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.") Just as the Bible teaches that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, He is able to breathe new life into Black people and make them the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Countee Cullen's "The Shroud of Color" expresses the heart of a Black man contemplating ending his life rather than spending another day as the living dead. He pours out his heart to God about the imprisoning effect of his color, but God entreats him to show him that he is not yet ready for burial:

*"Dark child of sorrow, mine no less, what art  
Of mine can make thee see and play thy part?  
The key to all strange things is in thy heart."*<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Cullen, "The Shroud of Color," *Collected Writings*, 100.

The man was enlightened by the wondrous things that God showed him: how every living thing strives for life (“and no thing died that did not give / A testimony that it longed to live”); how God and Christ fought Lucifer that he might have life; and how the heritage handed down to him by his Black ancestors was one of overcoming through faith.

And somehow it was borne upon my brain  
How being dark, and living through the pain  
Of it, is more courage than angels have.  
.....  
“Lord, not for what I saw in flesh or bone  
Of fairer men; not raised on faith along;  
Lord, I will live persuaded by mine own,  
I cannot play the recreant to these;  
My spirit has come home, that sailed the doubtful seas.”<sup>65</sup>

James Weldon Johnson, in his tribute “O Black and Unknown Bards,” celebrates the enduring power and beauty of the spirituals, the enslaved Africans’ unique contribution to American culture:

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.<sup>66</sup>

Langston Hughes gives tribute to the inner beauty of Black people as well as the outer. The superlatives in the verse that follows (“Poem [4] To the Black Beloved”) are reminiscent of the almost worshipful language of the Song of Solomon in the Bible:

Ah,  
My black one,  
Thou art not beautiful  
Yet thou hast  
A loveliness

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>66</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “O Black and Unknown Bards,” *Complete Poems*, p. 56.

Surpassing beauty

Oh,  
My black one,  
Thou art not good  
Yet thou hast  
A purity  
Surpassing goodness.

Ah,  
My black one,  
Thou art not luminous  
Yet an altar of jewels,  
An altar of shimmering jewels,  
Would pale in the light  
Of thy darkness,  
Pale in the light  
Of thy darkness.<sup>67</sup>

*Christianity/Spirituality Interwoven into the Fabric of Everyday Life*

Many African Americans, while not necessarily professing Christianity, nevertheless appear to accept and even practice certain Christian teachings as true and valuable guidance for living. It is possible that some indigenous African religions lent themselves to this all-encompassing view of faith. According to Williams and Dixie:

. . . West Africans put religion and God in particular at the center of life. It was normal behavior for slaves to cry out to the West African gods for assistance in their struggle for liberation. Their cries took various forms: drumming and dancing, veneration of the ancestors, spirit possession, ring shouts, African-style burials, dancing, and ritual sacrifices.<sup>68</sup>

Table 3.5 presents Scriptures that have been foundational to traditional Black life in America; their themes are evident in the works of several Renaissance writers.

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<sup>67</sup> Hughes, "Poem [4]," *Collected Poems*, 58.

<sup>68</sup> Williams and Dixie, *This Far by Faith*, 17.

Table 3.5 Scriptures Relating Christianity to Everyday Life

Scripture Reference	Text	Theme
Gen. 2:7	And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.	The Spirit of God has given life to all men.
Gen. 22:18	In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice.	Through the seed of Abraham, God's blessings are for all men.
Rom. 1:20	For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.	Everyone can know that God is God by the things that He has made, showing forth his power and divine nature.
Ps. 19:1-2	The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge.	God's creation pays tribute to God, every day and every night.
Ps. 24:1	The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell within.	Everything and everyone was created by God and belongs to God.
Rom. 12:19	Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.	God is the judge of all.
Gal. 6:7	Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.	You will reap what you sow.
Gal. 6:9	And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.	You will be rewarded for doing good.
Deut 30:19	I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed shall live	Reward for those who live according to God's word.
Exod. 20:3-17	The Ten Commandments	God gave the law for all men to obey.

In the following passage, theologian Gayraud Wilmore vividly describes the way in which African Americans made their religion uniquely their own since slavery:

The secular and the sacred met and embraced each other in the bodily celebration of the homologous unity of all things—the holy and profane, good and evil, the beautiful and dreadful. To give oneself up with shouts of joy and ‘singing feet’ to this wholeness of being, to the ecstatic celebration of one’s creaturehood, and to experience that creaturehood taken up and possessed by God in a new state of consciousness, was to imbibe the most restorative medicine available to the slave.<sup>69</sup>

This aspect of Christianity as practiced by African Americans, the merging of the spiritual and the secular, is evident in a wide array of Harlem Renaissance literature, as demonstrated in the text that follows.

In the midst of the bars and the liquor and the clubs and the blues of 1920s Harlem, the Black Christian Church remained an integral part of African American life. Physician and author Rudolph Fisher toured the Harlem night life in 1927 following a five-year absence. In describing his memories of the Garden of Joy, an open-air cabaret on Seventh Avenue, Fisher reminisced:

Not far away the Abyssinian Church used to hold its Summer camp-meetings in a great round circus-tent. Night after night there would arise the mingled strains of blues and spirituals, those peculiarly Negro forms of song, the one secular and the other religious, but both born of wretchedness in travail, both with their soarings of exultation and sinkings of despair. I used to wonder if God, hearing them both, found any real distinction.<sup>70</sup>

Here Fisher provides a clue as to the way that African Americans of the early twentieth century were able to synthesize their social and spiritual strivings into heartfelt expression to God, whether through their dancing, singing the blues, or

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<sup>69</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 34.

<sup>70</sup> Rudolph Fisher, “The Caucasian Storms Harlem,” reprinted from *American Mercury*, 1927, in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 114.

blending them with the spirituals into what later became known as gospel music. For many African Americans, spirit was not just something they had—it was who they were, and it was infused into every aspect of their lives.

Gayraud Wilmore expounds on DuBois' liberal interpretation of spirituality and theology to express the fullness of Black people's relationship to their religion:

DuBois also understood theology in a broader, nontechnical sense than that term usually means today. In this nontechnical sense the theology of the African American community is properly developed not exclusively in theological seminaries, but in the streets, beauty parlors, barber shops, pool halls, and night clubs of the community, as well as in the churches. . . . [The conversations in these venues outside the church] may more accurately reflect the operative, pragmatic spirituality and theology of the black community than the religious literature of its neighborhood Sunday Schools. . . . This kind of reflective and self-correction interpretation of black religion and culture will find that the most basic values of the folk are clustered around a core of beliefs that still includes the conviction that a righteous God ensures human justice in an inhuman and unjust world. Most African Americans still believe that this God of both wrath and mercy calls the poor and oppressed to a more abundant life in this world and the world beyond.<sup>71</sup>

In *The New Negro*, Rudolph Fisher's "Vestiges—Harlem Sketches" presents four vignettes of life in Harlem and how religion affected the life of the everyday man. The first tracks the steps of a migrated southern preacher who is hard-pressed to make ends meet while preaching in Harlem. On this particular day, he is drawn by a song into a church pastored by a false prophet who was "inspired to preach the gospel by the draft laws of 1917." Upon recognizing their former pastor from the south, members of the congregation are ready to leave immediately to join forces with the man who trusted as they did that "The Lord will provide."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Wilmore, "Survival, Elevation, and Liberation in Black Religion," in *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 279.

<sup>72</sup> Rudolph Fisher, "Vestiges—Harlem Sketches," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke, 77.

The second vignette describes a conversation between a young girl lying to her grandmother so that she can go out on the town, and the grandmother at home fervently praying for the child's lost soul. A father who is concerned about his daughter getting too educated to believe the Bible is the focus of the next story. The "Harlem Sketches" end with two friends who go into a church tent summer camp meeting just to pass the time until the nightclubs open. In stating his reluctance to enter, one remarked, "I'm a preacher's son—got enough o' that stuff when I was a kid and couldn't protect myself."<sup>73</sup> However, the hell-and-damnation message preached inside the tent touches a place in his soul and shows him that he is not as free of its influence as he thought he was.

In his poem "Brass Spittoons," Hughes expounds on the disparate aspects of Negro life making up the whole of a person:

Two dollars  
Buys shoes for the baby.  
House rent to pay.  
Gin on Saturday,  
Church on Sunday.

My God!  
Babies and gin and church  
And women and Sunday  
All mixed up with dimes and  
Dollars and clean spittoons  
And house rent to pay."<sup>74</sup>

He then goes on to offer up the clean, bright, brass spittoon "on the altar of the Lord," signifying that in every aspect of his life and labor, the Negro's existence is inextricably interwoven with his intrinsic faith.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>74</sup> Hughes, "Brass Spittoons," *Complete Poems*, 86.

Hughes pays homage to an everyday Christian hero in “A Song to a Negro Wash-Woman.” He acknowledges the strength, sacrifice, and faithfulness of women of color as they demonstrate their love through service to their families and to God.

Yes, I know you, wash-woman.  
I know how you send your children to school, and high-  
school, and even college.  
I know how you work and help your man when times are  
hard.  
I know how you build your house up from the wash-tub  
And call it home.  
And how you raise your churches from white suds for the  
service of Holy God.  
.....  
And I've seen you in church a Sunday morning singing,  
praising your Jesus, because some day you're going to  
sit on the right hand of the Son of God and forget  
you ever were a wash-woman. And the aching back  
and the bundles of clothes will be unremembered  
then.  
Yes, I've seen you singing.  
  
And for you,  
O singing wash-woman,  
For you, singing little brown woman,  
Singing strong black woman,  
Singing tall yellow woman,  
Arms deep in white suds,  
Soul clean,  
Clothes clean,—  
For you I have many songs to make  
Could I but find the words.<sup>75</sup>

This poem could have been written for the character Grandma Hagar in Hughes' novel *Not Without Laughter*.<sup>76</sup> She, too, was a wash-woman who supported her family by taking in laundry for white folks. Hughes had apparently developed a deep admiration for Black women and their contributions to their families and to the

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<sup>75</sup> Hughes, “A Song to a Negro Wash-Woman,” *Collected Poems*, 41-42.

<sup>76</sup> Hagar was also the name of the Egyptian handmaid who bore a son (Ishmael) to Abraham, but was later cast out into the wilderness where God provided for her and her son (Gen. 16:7-16 and 21:9-21).



Black community at large. He recognized and respected the role that Christianity played in helping them to endure.

Jean Toomer takes an interesting approach to illustrating the position of Christianity in everyday life. In his poem “Gum,” he juxtaposes two images seen together in the city of Washington, perhaps to point out the meld between the spiritual and the natural. Or maybe he was trying to show the commercialization of Christianity—how it had been brought down to the level of common advertising.

On top of two tall buildings,  
Where Seventh Street joins  
The Avenue,  
The city’s signs:

STAR  
J E S U S  
The Light of the World

...  
WRIGLEYS  
eat it  
after  
every meal  
It Does You Good

Intermittently, their lights flash  
Down upon the streets of Washington,  
The sleek pat streets some asphalt spider  
Spun and tired of.  
Upon a fountain in the square  
Where sparrows get their water,  
Upon the tambourines and drum  
Of the Salvation Army jawing,  
Hallelujah!  
The crowd  
jaws Jesus  
jawing gum.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Jean Toomer, “Gum,” in *The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer*, ed. Robert Jones and Margery Toomer Latimer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 18.

## Christianity Challenged in Harlem Renaissance Literature

In contrast to the substantial body of literature that seemed to affirm Christianity, presenting it in a mostly positive light, other writings produced during the Harlem Renaissance challenged the value of Christianity as a viable religion for African Americans. Cain Hope Felder, former editor of *The Journal of Religious Thought*, had the following to say about why Christianity has faced such challenges:

Many Blacks, disillusioned by the frequent moral ineptitude of the Church in matters of socioeconomic and political policies, have rejected and abandoned the Church, turning to other religions, cults, or cynical atheism. Their responses are not a solution to the problem, but an escape from the problem.<sup>78</sup>

Felder's evaluation of the problem can be seen as speaking to the issue of complete freedom as being the ultimate goal of religion. This implies not only freedom of worship, but also the freedom to reach the full potential to effectively carry out the will of God for one's life. The devastating lack of political and socioeconomic freedom for the majority of African Americans in the early twentieth century perhaps led some Harlem Renaissance writers to strongly challenge the religion in which so many of their people had put their faith. Some of their observations indicated the opinion that Christianity just was not effective in addressing the needs of Black people.

According to religious historian Gayraud Wilmore,

. . . the intelligentsia . . . identified psychologically with the masses and rebelled openly against the authority and leadership of the church. Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen were three eloquent representatives of this class—the 'New Negroes' of the Harlem Renaissance—who participated in this revolt. They announced in the incandescent pages of *The Messenger*:

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<sup>78</sup> Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 18.

“I am an Iconoclast  
I break the limbs of idols  
And smash the traditions of men.”<sup>79</sup>

So while these artists could appreciate some of the positive influences of traditional Christianity in the lives of Black people historically, at this point they rejected it as a viable option for themselves. A closer look at the factors described by Carter G. Woodson as contributing to the divergent posture of the church in the African American community will help to explain why some artists so vehemently challenged Christianity. Woodson cited Black religious cults, weak and hypocritical leadership, and the failure of Christian doctrine as the three major reasons for this effect. As described in Chapter 2, mainstream Christianity was also challenged by the rise of independent Black religions during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Though Woodson’s analysis is by no means comprehensive, it offers a useful construct for examining specific writings of Harlem Renaissance authors that show a clear relation to Woodson’s reasoning.

#### *Black Religious Cults and Independent Black Religions*

Following is a quote from Woodson’s analysis concerning the trend away from traditional Christianity in the African American community of the 1920s.

The movement has not been a sudden transition, but the migration of 1916-18 gave an unusual stimulus to this trend in the religion of the Negro. In those days when dislocated communicants in the industrial centers found themselves in a strange land they were easily proselytized by strange prophets.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 193.

<sup>80</sup> Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 301.

Woodson is not alone in his view about the trend towards divergent religious movements. Gayraud Wilmore makes the following comment about the radical change in the character and culture of those times.

The dechristianization tendency in African American culture after the First World War was partly due to the demoralization of the masses by poverty and racism. If new sects and cults flourished it was because the survival mechanisms that their members found useful in the rural South went through a hardening process in the North that demystified black Christianity and produced a religiously motivated consciousness of color and racial destiny. The intellectuals and artists of the Harlem Renaissance perceived a rich, new culture developing out of this urbanization of survivalism. Their attempt to capture its aesthetic meaning and give it voice helped create a new cultural naturalism.<sup>81</sup>

The popularity of the new religious groups (described in more detail in Chapter 2) may have represented the desire of the “New Negro” to break with the past and define himself, just as Alain Locke described this phenomenon in the intellectual world. Thus, one sees the enormous following of the African Orthodox Church (associated with Garvey’s UNIA), and smaller groups such as the Moorish Science Temple and Father Divine’s movement. The African Orthodox Church emphasized the royalty and pride of Black people made in God’s own image; the Moorish Science Temple drew from Islam and challenged the notion of Christianity as an acceptable religion for Black people; and Father Divine instituted social activities in his organization that specifically focused on the worldly conditions of the poor. Many African Americans were drawn to various aspects of these movements that addressed issues in their lives unfulfilled by the traditional Christian church.

While it is obvious that these and other organizations were born out of the need to more accurately reflect and work toward achieving freedom for African Americans, there was another effect. As David Levering Lewis observed:

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<sup>81</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 273.

Praising the Lord, vibrating with ecstasy, and glowing in a high of momentary deliverance were what a good Harlem Sunday was all about. But when the transplanted revivalism of the South went far beyond its traditional boundaries, it created a cultism that was frequently weird, sometimes harmful, and, on occasion, both.<sup>82</sup>

Though they did not necessarily join these different religious groups, and to some degree were even critical of the cults in their writings, many artists of the Harlem Renaissance joined their brothers in looking for new answers to old problems. Thus, the period witnessed Harlem Renaissance writers being published in magazines as diverse as the National Urban League's *Opportunity*, the NAACP's *Crisis*, the UNIA's *The Negro World*, and the socialists' *Messenger*.

#### *Weak and Hypocritical Leadership*

Another aspect of the trend away from traditional Christianity in the African American community was the perceived character of its leadership. According to Woodson:

The youth and the talented tenth of the congregations have left the church in considerable numbers not so much because of doctrinal difference as because of *dislike for its leadership* [emphasis added] and lack of a program....many Negro members have ceased to cooperate with the church because of its failure to retain that sanctity and holiness which were once found in the religion of the earlier generations.<sup>83</sup>

By the 1920s, in too many ways, the Christian church was no longer the solid moral compass for the African American community that it had been in the past. One reason is that the community itself had changed. World War I, the northward migration, the lynchings of Black people and continued socioeconomic degradation, and the impersonal environment of urban life had all served in some way to weaken the community's bond and the strength of the church. Congregations no longer knew

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<sup>82</sup> Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 222.

<sup>83</sup> Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 300.

their ministers personally as they had when they were all neighbors in the south. And some of the independent churches, lacking sufficient oversight, appeared to be more self-indulgent than interested in feeding their flocks. To some of the educated participants in the Harlem Renaissance, the Black church had become a comic and shameful institution. They saw the masses of African Americans being exploited for what little they had. According to Langston Hughes, this was a period when Charleston preachers opened up shouting churches as sideshows for white tourists.<sup>84</sup>

James Weldon Johnson spoke in *Black Manhattan* about the “bootleggers of religion.”<sup>85</sup> Bootlegging refers to making, carrying, or selling something illegally, without proper authorization or sanction. These were men whose private lives demonstrated that if they had ever been sanctioned by God to carry His message and shepherd His people, they certainly were not living by the rules presented in the Christian Bible for caring for the people of God. Instead, they used the pulpit for personal profit and power.

Langston Hughes gives his perspective of such a “bootlegger” in his first autobiography:

In the waning days of the New Negro Renaissance, in the same church where our leading poet [Cullen] was married, there occurred a series of the most amazing revivals ever seen in Harlem, conducted by the Reverend Dr. Becton. Dr. Becton was a charlatan if there ever was one, but he filled the huge church—because he gave a good show.<sup>86</sup>

Hughes’s detailed description of his encounter with Reverend Dr. Becton perhaps sheds some light on the reason that organized Christianity was not a viable option for him. In soliciting Hughes to be a literary editor of his church’s magazine,

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<sup>84</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 227.

<sup>85</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 165.

<sup>86</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 275.

Becton shared with him the secrets of his great public success as a preacher. Hughes relates the story:

The Reverend Dr. Becton told me he had been a student of behavioristic psychology for a long time—that was why he had his audience get up and down so much, to rest them and hold them longer at his services . . . He said he knew the effects of music and rhythm on the human emotions, for he had made a study of audiences and their reactions, and he knew how to handle them. . . . During his talk with me, never once did he mention God. In the quiet of his study, he talked business, God being, no doubt, for public consumption.

I did not take the job, but it would have been interesting to know Dr. Becton better and to find out what he really thought of those hundreds of poor people who daily gave into his keeping a Consecrated Dime for God.<sup>87</sup>

In a portion of his poem “Goodbye, Christ,” Hughes further expounds on what could be viewed as the primary contributors to the diminished reputation of Christianity:

Listen, Christ,  
You did alright in your day, I reckon—  
But that day’s gone now.  
They ghosted you up a swell story, too,  
Called it Bible—  
But it’s dead now.  
The popes and the preachers’ve  
Made too much money from it.  
They’ve sold you to too many

Kings, generals, robbers, and killers—  
Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks,  
Even to Rockefeller’s Church,  
Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.  
You ain’t no good no more.  
They’ve pawned you  
Till you’ve done wore out.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>88</sup> Hughes, “Goodbye Christ,” *Collected Poems*, 166.

The Bible itself contains many references, such as the ones below, to the false prophets who will come seeking to fulfill their own desires, leading astray the people of God.

Matt. 7:1—Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Mark 13:2—For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall show signs and wonders, to seduce [deceive], if it were possible, even the elect [chosen ones].

2 Pet. 2: 1-3—But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of.

***And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you*** [emphasis added]: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.

So Hughes' experience with Reverend Becton seemed to correspond with what had been spoken of centuries prior in the Bible. Some of the preachers did not appear to be focused on furthering the cause of Christianity, but instead were taking advantage of whatever fame, fortune, and folly they could capitalize on from the people. In spite of the multitude of churches, too many of their members were still confused and remained untransformed into the new life that was supposed to be theirs as Christians. At the same time, some of the preachers' lives were visibly transformed in an embarrassingly opulent manner. Their conspicuous lifestyle may have led many Christians to view them as taking far better care of themselves than of their congregations.



To a Christian way of thinking, these observations would bring certain Scriptures to mind. In the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul lays out the purpose that God had in authorizing and sanctioning leaders in the church.

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists, and some, pastors and teachers;

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ:

***That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of man, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive:*** [emphasis added]<sup>89</sup>

Without pastors and teachers dedicated to spreading the truth of God's word and having the best interests of their congregations at heart, the people in the pew ultimately suffer—remaining immature in their Christian growth. The deliberate (or ignorant) mixing of lies with the truth results in an unwieldy, elusive Christianity that is hard to understand, and even more difficult to grasp, on a personal level. Countee Cullen, the Renaissance poet who most often portrayed religious images and subjects in his work, was an example of how contaminated Christianity can affect even the most sensitive heart. One historian noted: “But Countee Cullen (whose adoptive father was a Methodist minister) often used Christian themes only to show his deep, personal ambivalence.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Cullen's stepfather was pastor of the very church [Salem Methodist Church] where the Dr. Becton exposed by Hughes had preached such an

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<sup>89</sup> Ephes. 4:11-14.

<sup>90</sup> Huggins, *Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, 341.

“amazing” revival, yet belied everything he taught in his later conversation with Hughes.

Both Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson spoke to another problem concerning the influence of false prophets in their failed “salvation” experiences. Church historian Woodson gives the following picture of some of the churches of the period, created by what he termed “superfluous [excessive, unnecessary, irrelevant] preachers”:

The mission of the church, they [superfluous preachers] insist, is to save souls, and to do this the people must be brought together on Sundays and as often as possible during the week to listen to the moaning and groaning noises which the leader makes and respond in like fashion with their emotional outbursts supplemented by explosive music swelling the uproarious manifestation almost beyond human endurance.<sup>91</sup>

With this lone emphasis on saving souls, the physical, worldly needs of people went unmet. At the same time, the prescription for salvation itself as described in this passage and in the writers’ voices was contrary to the Word of God. The Bible offers the following as the way to salvation:

Romans 10:9-10—That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.  
For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

Within the context of Christian doctrine, the problems that false prophets pose for the church and its community lead to the following progression: False prophets lead to false teachings, which lead to false worship and false hope; people who can stand for nothing and fall for everything. By not teaching the truth of God’s Word, false

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<sup>91</sup> Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 295.

prophets were perhaps the greatest enemy to Christianity in the African American community.

### *Failure of Christian Theology*

This segment discusses the third aspect of Woodson's analysis regarding the African American trend away from the Christian church during this period.

Some of the Negroes of the type now leaving the churches do so not because of the Negro church itself but because of the increasing tendency to regard our so-called Christianity as a failure. They look not at the practices of Negro communicants but at those of the whites from whom the Negroes took over their religion. The white man professing to be a Christian is the greatest antagonist to the practice of the principles taught by Jesus of Nazareth. The hands of the church itself are stained with slavery, its members destroy nations blocking their way, dispossess the helpless, and massacre the unoffending. ***Negroes of advanced thought are now saying openly that, if this is Christianity, the world must find a new way out of darkness to God*** [emphasis added].<sup>92</sup>

By and large, when the most educated tier of African American society—the Talented Tenth, the cream of the crop—looked at the destruction wrought throughout the world in the name of white Christendom, they could not fully accept Christianity as being the best option for Black people. They rebelled against that side of Christianity that seemed to keep Black people subjected, downtrodden, inferior, and powerless. How did Christianity as practiced become known as a tool of oppression and violence?

Woodson gives the following answer:

To begin with, theology is of a pagan origin. Albert Magnus and Thomas Aquinas worked out the first system of it by applying to religious discussion the logic of Aristotle, a pagan philosopher, who believed neither in the creation of the world nor the immortality of the soul. At best it was degenerate learning, based upon the theory that knowledge is gained by the mind working upon itself rather than upon

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 301.

matter or through sense perception. The world was, therefore, confused with the discussion of absurdities as it is today by those of prominent churchmen. By their peculiar ‘reasoning,’ too, theologians have sanctioned most of the ills of the ages. They justified the Inquisition, serfdom, and slavery. Theologians of our time defend segregation and the annihilation of one race by the other. They have drifted away from righteousness into an effort to make wrong seem right.<sup>93</sup>

Christianity as presented to Black people by white missionaries has posed many contradictions. For them, these white missionaries often mixed the truth of God’s word with error, by exalting private agendas above serving the people, and by following conventional wisdom instead of the wisdom of God as presented in sacred text. Their teachings veered sharply from the Bible particularly concerning matters of race and what they believed to be God’s will. Thus white Christianity has come to be associated with many offenses against Black people. Crimes justified by white Christian theology include slavery, wars, discrimination, superiority, lynching, overlooking human suffering (and thus contributing to it through inaction), colonialism, and imperialism.

This point of view had been presented previously in graphic form in David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, where he laid the responsibility on white Christianity for the state of Black people throughout the world. For many Blacks, Apostle Paul’s warning in Col. 2:8 had particular significance: “Beware lest any man spoil you [plunder you or take you captive] through philosophy and vain [empty] deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

Harlem Renaissance authors addressed the ills caused by this failure of Christian theology in a number of poems. In the satirical “Merry Christmas,”

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<sup>93</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Tenth Printing (The Associated Publishers, 1933; New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1998), 60.

Langston Hughes highlights the hypocrisy of Christianity's role in war and oppression being experienced in the black and brown nations worldwide:

Merry Christmas, China,  
From the gun-boats in the river,  
Ten-inch shells for Christmas gifts,  
And peace on earth forever.

Merry Christmas, India,  
To Gandhi in his cell,  
From righteous Christian England,  
Ring out, bright Christmas bell!

Ring Merry Christmas, Africa,  
From Cairo to the Cape!  
Ring Halleluiah! Praise the Lord!  
(For murder and for rape.)

Ring Merry Christmas, Haiti!  
(And drown the voodoo drums—  
We'll rob you to the Christian hymns  
Until the next Christ comes.)

Ring Merry Christmas, Cuba!  
(While Yankee domination  
Keeps a nice fat president  
In a little half-starved nation.)

And to you down-and-outers,  
("Due to economic laws")  
Oh, eat, drink, and be merry  
With a bread-line Santa Claus—

While all the world hails Christmas,  
While all the church bells sway!  
While, better still, the Christian guns  
Proclaim this joyous day!

While holy steel that makes us strong  
Spits forth a mighty Yuletide song:  
SHOOT Merry Christmas everywhere!  
Let Merry Christmas GAS the air!<sup>94</sup>

Claude McKay added his voice to the chorus of those who hailed God as the repayer of deceitful evildoers with their just rewards. The paradox of Christian slaveholders is a case in point, along with white missionaries who had some culpability in the subjection of Black people all over the world. These lines from his 1919 poem “The Dominant White” clearly reveal McKay’s opinion of what the oppressive white man would reap:

God gave you power to build and help and lift  
    But you proved prone to persecute and slay  
    .....  
You have betrayed the black, maligned the yellow;  
    But what else could we hope of you who set  
The hand even of your own against his fellow;  
    To stem the dire tide that threatens yet?  
You called upon the name of your false god  
    To lash our wounded flesh with knotted cords  
And trample us into the blood-stained sod,  
    And justified your deeds with specious words:  
Oh! You have proved unworthy of your trust,  
And God shall humble you down to the dust.

This pain you gave us nothing can assuage,  
    Who hybridized a proud and virile race,  
Bequeathed to it a bastard heritage  
    And made the black ashamed to see his face.  
You ruined him, put doubt into his heart,  
    You set a sword between him and his kin,  
And preached to him, with simple, lying art  
    About the higher worth of your white skin!  
Oh White Man! You have trifled with your trust,  
And God shall humble you down to the dust. . . .<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Hughes, “Merry Christmas,” *Collected Poems*, 132.

<sup>95</sup> McKay, “The Dominant White,” *Complete Poems*, 134-135.

McKay expressed apparent anger about the fact that Christian whites not only diluted the Black person's blood, but then put this hybrid race to shame. One of the most damaging teachings of white theology is that God is white. Logic says that, if indeed God is white, and a person is Black, and humans are made in the image and likeness of God, then he who is Black is not a human. Thus was nourished the Black people's sense of inferiority and the white's perceived superiority.

In his poem "Conversion," Jean Toomer sums up his view of how people of African descent accommodated the "white man's religion."

African Guardian of Souls,  
Drunk with rum,  
Feasting on a strange cassava,  
Yielding to new words and a weak palabra  
Of a white-faced sardonic god—  
Grins, cries  
Amen,  
Shouts hosanna.<sup>96</sup>

The picture is one of a white-faced god laughing, even sneering, at the intoxicated Black souls who worship him in their ignorance. Such a white god is ineffectual in helping Blacks to deal with their personal trials, as demonstrated in the following poem by Hughes, "Song for a Dark Girl."

Way Down South in Dixie  
    (Break the heart of me)  
They hung my black young lover  
    To a cross roads tree.  
Way Down South in Dixie  
    (Bruised body high in air)  
I asked the white Lord Jesus  
    What was the use of prayer. . . .<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Jean Toomer, *Cane*, (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1923; reprinted New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 28.

<sup>97</sup> Hughes, "Song for a Dark Girl," *Complete Poems*, 104

This country's spate of lynching during the first three decades of the twentieth century led many people who perhaps once believed in Christianity to belie all faith. Following is part of a poem that Claude McKay wrote in 1919 to describe reflections after viewing a lynching "by pale-faced demons":<sup>98</sup>

My blood-tears, wring in pain from my heart's core,  
Accuse dumb heaven and curse a world that sleeps:  
.....  
The fierce flames drove me back from where I stood;  
There is no God, Earth sleeps, my heart is dead.

A year later, McKay rendered another poem about this most despicable activity, noting the emotions (or lack thereof) in the perpetrators. He also calls to mind the crucifixion of Jesus:

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven,  
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,  
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;  
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.  
All night a bright and solitary star  
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,  
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)  
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.  
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view  
The ghastly body swaying in the sun  
The women thronged to look, but never a one  
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;  
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,  
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee."<sup>99</sup>

Langston Hughes points out the hypocrisy of white Christians who came outwardly in the name of brotherhood but who harbored evil intentions. They brought a construction of religion that compromised Christianity. Hughes' poem "To Certain 'Brothers'" calls to mind the Scriptural reference Matt. 23:27, 28—"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which

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<sup>98</sup> McKay, "J' Accuse," *Complete Poems*, 138.

<sup>99</sup> McKay, "The Lynching," *Complete Poems*, 176-177.



indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." Hughes responds to such hypocrisy:

You sicken me with lies,  
With truthful lies.  
And with your pious faces.  
And your wide, out-stretched,  
    Mock-welcome, Christian hands.  
While underneath  
Is dirt and ugliness  
And rotting hearts,  
And wild hyenas howling  
In your soul's waste lands.<sup>100</sup>

In his poem "Enslaved," McKay joins with Jesus Christ in prescribing "woe" unto those who teach such lies.

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,  
For weary centuries despised, oppressed,  
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place  
In the great life line of the Christian West;  
And in the Black Land disinherited,  
Robbed in the ancient country of its birth,  
My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as lead,  
For this my race that has no home on earth.  
Then from the dark depths of my soul I cry  
To the avenging angel to consume  
The white man's world of wonders utterly:  
Let it be swallowed up in earth's vast womb,  
Or upward roll as sacrificial smoke  
To liberate my people from its yoke.<sup>101</sup>

In "Drama for Winter Night (Fifth Avenue)," Hughes illustrates a similar point of view ("for this my race that has no home on earth") that, from Harlem to heaven, there is no place of shelter or rest for a poor, weary Black person.

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<sup>100</sup> Hughes, "To Certain Brothers," *Collected Poems*, 55.

<sup>101</sup> McKay, "Enslaved," *Complete Poems*, 167.

You can't sleep here  
My good man,  
You can't sleep here,  
This is the house of God.

.....

After being ushered out of the church, forced out of a car, and even escorted off of the street, the man pleads:

Oh, God,  
Lemme git by St. Peter.  
Lemme sit down on the steps of your throne.  
Lemme rest somewhere.  
What did yuh say, God?  
What did yuh say?  
You can't sleep here. . . .  
Bums can't stay. . . .<sup>102</sup>

Hughes illustrates in the following poem that religious discrimination extended to class as well as color. God is portrayed here as god of the “haves” only.

Hungry child,  
I didn't make this world for you.  
You didn't buy any stock in my railroad.  
You didn't invest in my corporation.  
Where are your shares in standard oil?  
I made the world for the rich  
And the will-be-rich  
And the have-always-been-rich.  
Not for you,  
Hungry child.<sup>103</sup>

But here at the last, in his poem “From the Dark Tower,” Countee Cullen provides a ray of hope for the darker peoples of the world, corroborated by Scriptures:

We shall not always plant while others  
reap  
The golden increment of bursting fruit,  
Not always countenance, abject and mute,  
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;

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<sup>102</sup> Hughes, “Drama for Winter Night,” *Collected Poems*, 47.

<sup>103</sup> Hughes, “God to Hungry Child,” *Collected Poems*, 48.

Not everlastingly while others sleep  
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,  
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;  
We were not made eternally to weep.

The night who sable breast relieves the  
stark,  
White stars is no less lovely being dark,  
.....  
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,  
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.<sup>104</sup>

Cullen expresses his sentiment and hope that his people will one day reap the benefit from the seeds that they have sown. The book of Isaiah also describes a future in which God’s people shall enjoy the fruits of their labor. But until that time, the Bible decrees that there will be representatives who will continually lift their voices (or wield their pens) about the situation of their people:

I have set **watchmen upon thy walls**, O Jerusalem, **which shall never hold their peace** [emphasis added] day nor night: ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence. And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem [Blacks] a praise in the earth.<sup>105</sup>

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance served in effect as “watchmen on the walls” for African Americans, observing and writing about their people and their story. They were not silent in raising questions about Christianity or advancing the cause of freedom and justice. As demonstrated, they observed some positive aspects of Christianity and also expressed some challenges to it. History has shown that Christianity has sustained a position of influence within the African American community. Despite the reservations noted herein, the Christian influence on African American literature was significant during the Harlem Renaissance and beyond.

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<sup>104</sup> Cullen, “From the Dark Tower,” *Collected Writings*, 139.

<sup>105</sup> Isa. 62:6-7.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSIONS

As stated in the Introduction to this thesis, this chapter will provide a summary assessment of the relationship between Christianity and the works of select writers of the Harlem Renaissance. It will review the answers found to the questions posed in the beginning of this thesis and attempt to place these cultural components in meaningful historical context.

#### What was the historical and religious context of the Harlem Renaissance?

Approximately three generations out of slavery, African Americans were in many ways free in name only. They were faced with the patriotic irony of fighting for democracy abroad while suffering economic and political oppression, lynching, and race riots at home. The great migration of African Americans out of the South into the urban centers of the Northern states during World War I to fill jobs left vacant by soldiers was a major change in the country's demographics. Many Blacks also immigrated to New York from the Caribbean.

Another strong incentive for Blacks to migrate to northern areas was lynching, "the shame of America." Between 1889 and 1921, more than 3,400 people had been lynched, including 83 women.<sup>1</sup> The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) became the primary combatant in the battle against this horrible crime. William Edward Burghardt DuBois, one of the founders of the NAACP, was one of the most vocal spokesmen against the mistreatment of African Americans. In his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, he also suggested that Booker T. Washington's widely accepted industrial education model relegated Black people to

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<sup>1</sup> NAACP Newspaper Advertisement, November 22, 1922, reprinted in John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 357.

the status of a work horse and did not allow the more intelligent of the race to exercise their abilities to excel in the cultural arts. Other organizations such as the National Urban League assisted in supporting DuBois' new model.

Life for African Americans had a much broader scope following the turn of the century. No longer limited to the boundaries of the plantation, or even a self-contained free "colored" community, African Americans were exposed to many different people, places, and things. They began to explore other religions, systems, and organizations as tools to effect change in their situation.

Harlem became a destination of choice for migration because of the availability of decent housing and jobs. For many African Americans, segregated Harlem represented a mecca of sorts, where they could own property, build churches, run businesses, and create a culture peculiarly insulated from the national proscriptions and prejudices.

The character of Black religion also began to change during this time. Even though membership in the Methodist and Baptist churches continued to grow, the early twentieth century saw the rise of many new, independent Black religions and religious cults, especially in the urban areas such as Harlem. Also, because of trickery and hypocrisy at the highest levels, the traditional Black church lost the stellar reputation that it once had. Perhaps related to this decline was the rise of Marcus Garvey as a race leader. Garvey, an immigrant from Jamaica, brought to African Americans a new kind of Christianity that exalted their blackness to a regal status.

To what extent and in what ways did Christianity influence the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance?

The God of Christianity was very real to the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. To some, He was a very real hope; to others, a real disappointment. Many of them had a Christian upbringing and were educated in Christian-based schools. Even if they did

not claim Christianity as their own personal belief system, they acknowledged the deep influence that it had traditionally had on their people. Christianity was still a valuable protest tool; more importantly, it was part of the African American heritage. Thus, Renaissance artists presented both positive and negative appraisals of Christianity, as they observed it and the way that it was practiced in both the Black and white communities.

Christianity had an indirect influence on the artists in the fact that the black Christian churches often provided forums for and served as promoters of African American literature and oratory. In his autobiography, Langston Hughes told of his meeting Mr. Dill, the business manager of the *Crisis* [magazine of the NAACP], who attended the Community Church in Harlem. “He told them of my poetry, and that church was, I believe, the first church in which I was invited to read my poems. . . .”<sup>2</sup> This relationship with the church as forum continued throughout the Renaissance period. The Federated Council of Churches awarded Hughes the Harmon Gold Award for Literature for his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, in 1931.<sup>3</sup> James Weldon Johnson noted in his autobiography that he was inspired to write “The Creation” one evening following his fourth talk at various churches in a single day.<sup>4</sup>

Did the tone of their artistry change greatly from the previous century? If so, what were the catalysts?

The tone of the work produced during the Harlem Renaissance did change substantially from that produced in the 1800s. Protest was no longer the primary guiding principle as it had been during the anti-slavery movement. Dialect was still used, but not in the comic, minstrel approach of the previous century. The ability of DuBois to articulate the dual consciousness of Black people gave impetus to a new

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<sup>2</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940) 332.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>4</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: Penguin Books, 1933), 336.

freedom of unparalleled insight and expression. Black people were now determined to become enlightened about themselves, to define themselves for themselves, outside of the Veil.

So the first wave of creativity was in some ways to show white America that Black artists could achieve the same literary excellence as white artists, often imitating their form and content. But the younger set of artists, in the spirit captured by Hughes' essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," came to produce art by, about, and for themselves in whatever way they desired. The influence of Marcus Garvey is also seen in their writings.

Notable pre-twentieth century African-American writers apparently had been able to come to terms with Christianity. Were the Renaissance artists able to do it? Why or why not?

Research on this project revealed that some of the most renowned writers of the earlier period effectively used Christian themes in their works. Phyllis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, Maria Stewart, and several other writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries either accepted Christianity or recognized its potential in the deliverance of enslaved Africans. Support for Christianity by African Americans in the late nineteenth century was fairly monolithic; it having provided such a great hope and outreach for newly freed slaves. Even those earlier African American writers who may not have agreed fully with how Christianity was practiced were reluctant to denigrate this force that sustained so many of their people.

However, with the new century came greater disillusionment at the failure of traditional Christianity to produce material changes in the social and economic conditions of Black people. Further stratification in the African American church came with the Great Migration of 1916-18, resulting in a splintered people who sought God in many different ways. Several independent church movements were born after

the beginning of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, religious cults, charlatans, and shysters also became notorious during this period. Instead of the dignity that had characterized Black churches of the previous century, a reputation of trickery and hypocrisy was present. By some standards, the traditional African American church had fallen into discredit and was a source of mockery and shame. Some Harlem Renaissance artists had a difficult time upholding what they may have perceived as a sordid and broken church.

#### What made their views different?

Various factors contributed to the changing views of the Renaissance artist. One of these was time—they simply felt that too much time had passed since emancipation for Black people to still be in their demeaned condition, facing economic, social, and political oppression, and even loss of life through lynchings and riots. The impatience of youth would not allow them to accept the old ways that, in their eyes, simply were not effective.

A second factor was the advent of three influential leaders—Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey. To some extent, the New Negro bought into the Washington concept of race uplift from within, no longer waiting on government programs or white acceptance; they also, by virtue of their birth, social status, and education, became DuBois' Talented Tenth—the intelligentsia of Black America. Perhaps most telling, however, was Garvey's statement, "We must inspire a literature and promulgate a doctrine of our own without any apologies to the powers that be."<sup>5</sup>

Garvey's teachings and views were reflected throughout much of the literature of the period. Garvey was a leader of the masses of the people; many Harlem

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<sup>5</sup>Marcus Garvey, in *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, ed. Robert A. Hill (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 3.



Renaissance artists chose to portray the life of the common man. Garvey preached that Black was beautiful; Renaissance artists depicted the internal and external beauty of things African. Garvey set up a hierarchy of Black royalty in the UNIA and the African Orthodox Church; Renaissance artists heralded the royal heritage of Africa.

In addition, African Americans were tiring of the many dilemmas facing them and now had the options to seek broader solutions to their problems.

What personal experiences did the Renaissance artists have with Christianity?

A large number of the Renaissance artists experienced a family heritage of religious upbringing. The authors showed an extraordinary breadth and depth of Biblical knowledge, often using Scriptural references in ways that exemplified the surpassing richness of the Word of God. Many artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance had close ties to the Black Christian church, with fathers, uncles, brothers, and other family members being in church leadership positions. Such proximity also may have allowed them to witness hypocrisy up-close and personally, resulting in an unfavorable assessment of the religion as they saw it practiced.

Others received much of their formal training at schools founded by Christian organizations with some degree of Christian-based curriculum. At these same schools, they also learned of the historical hypocrisy of the white church and realized that it reached far beyond American slavery.

The church was also a forum for displaying and promoting their arts. This meant that even non-Christians were exposed to church settings and sermons.

Historians Lincoln and Mamiya stated the following:

. . . black churches performed multifarious roles in moral nurture, politics, education, economics, and black culture in general. . . . institutions such as lodges, fraternity and sororities, and civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban league . . .

depended upon black churches and pastors for meeting places, leadership, financial resources, publicity, and members.<sup>6</sup>

It stands to reason that there could hardly be a member of the African American community who was not exposed to or touched by a Black church.

How was this Christian influence manifested in the literature?

A look at the sheer numbers of representative Renaissance works with Christian titles, characters, or themes cited in this paper makes it apparent that Christianity had no small influence on the artists of the period. Other such examples not previously mentioned herein include Arna Bontemps' poems "Nocturne at Bethesda," "Golgotha is a Mountain," and novel *God Sends Sunday*; Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Rudolph Fisher's novel *The Walls of Jericho* and short story "The Promised Land;" and Fenton Johnson's poems "Singing Hallelujah" and "My God in Heaven Said to Me."

Some of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance related their personal experiences with the Christian precepts of God in their writings. In moments of despair, they called on God to deliver them; in times of joy, they rejoiced with Hallelujahs just as the masses of people did. They obviously had no trouble questioning God; more often than making clear affirmations, they expressed their ambivalence about both the doctrine and the theology of Christianity.

By the first few decades of the twentieth century, Christianity had become broadly infused in African American culture. In fact, the Black church was viewed as the primary institution in the Black community. In writings about the common folk, then, it was a necessary component of the literature. The point of view, however, belonged uniquely to the artist. Harlem Renaissance writers demonstrated several motivations for referencing Christianity in their works, including the following:

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<sup>6</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 13th Printing, 2003 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 122-123.

- Using Biblical imagery and characterizations to relate to the situation of African Americans
- Expressing appreciation for the sustaining role of Christianity
- Challenging God to be just (in their view) like them and for them (e.g., a Black Christ)
- Disdaining and rejecting the pacifist attitudes fostered by the religion
- Searching for more effective solutions
- Expressing the need to take the black struggle to another level
- Exposing the weaknesses and hypocrisy of Christianity
- Seeing themselves as prophets of the times.

In her Introduction to Langston Hughes' novel *Not Without Laughter*, writer Maya Angelou made the following statement about the Harlem Renaissance authors; the highlighted reference is directly from the Christian Bible:

Renaissance artists took on the role of self-styled preachers, called by the situations of the people themselves, to be the voice of truth, **the watchmen on the wall** (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

This, then, seems to be the role that the artists of the Harlem Renaissance took upon themselves, to use their voice continuously to achieve for themselves and their people the prophetic objectives spoken of in the following verses by the prophet Isaiah:

I have set **watchmen upon thy walls**, O Jerusalem, **which shall never hold their peace** day nor night: ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence.

And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Maya Angelou, introduction to *Not Without Laughter*, Langston Hughes (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 62:6-7.

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