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# TEACHING AND WRITING ABOUT THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL HARVEY

Conducted by Randall J. Stephens

PAUL HARVEY IS PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT COLORADO SPRINGS. Harvey is a historian of American religion and has written broadly on race, the South, and the U.S. in the 19th and 20th centuries. He's the author of *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (University of

North Carolina Press, 2005). With Edward J. Blum he has written the forthcoming *Jesus in Red, White, and Black* (University of North Carolina Press).

Historically Speaking editor Randall Stephens recently caught up with Harvey to speak with him about the field of African-American religious history, teaching, and his new book *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

**Randall J. Stephens:** Could you say something about how historians wrote about African-American Christianity fifty years ago and how they write about it now?

**Paul Harvey:** Historians, at least white historians, mostly didn't write about African-American Christianity fifty years ago. Black scholars did, of course, and fifty years ago the works of sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier dominated the field. Those scholars tended to be highly critical of what they called "the black church," a term that was invented by 20th-century sociologists. They often saw "the black church" as either hopelessly otherworldly, peddling enthusiasm and a desperate eschatology rather than substantive improvements in the lives of their congregants, or (in the case of more well-established urban churches) too concerned with protecting bourgeois comforts to address the real issues facing most African Americans. Fifty years ago, liberation theology and "black theology" were just beginning to take root in works such as Howard Thurman's *Jesus of the Dispossessed*, a classic of 20th-century American theology. And of course Martin Luther King's writings were just starting to enter the public realm, culminating with "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in 1963. But in terms of scholarly works, the broader historical community basically knew nothing about African-American religious history.

Obviously we've come a long way since then; the same revolution in social history that affected all other fields of history in the 1960s and 1970s shaped the writing of African-American history as well. The 1970s were the real years of landmark achievements, especially with the publication of Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion* (very well known at the time) and Mechal Sobel's *Trabelin' On* (less well known then and now, but a brilliant if sometimes rather eccentric book). Over the next decade or two, studies of religion during and after slavery poured forth, and in my own early work I tried to contribute to that by pushing forward studies of African-American religion in time, focusing on the

years after the Civil War. Most recently, scholars such as Curtis Evans (*The Burden of Black Religion*) and Barbara Savage (*Their Spirits Walk Among Us*) have challenged us to question the very terms that have defined the field, including "the black church," which are intellectual constructs of a very particular period rather than historical realities themselves. This kind of challenge really hit the public realm when Eddie Glaude published a short piece called "The Black Church is Dead" for the *Huffington Post*. Glaude's piece suggested that contemporary black churches had lost their prophetic voice, and that black parishioners were gravitating toward gospel-of-prosperity preachers that celebrate American capitalism in a way that would shock a figure such as Martin Luther King. That piece generated such a controversy that it hit the *New York Times*. I begin my book by talking about the piece and the arguments that ensued from it.

**Stephens:** How do you think historians will be treating black religion fifty years from now?

**Harvey:** In the epilogue to my book I suggest a couple of themes that relate here: diversification and re-Africanization of African-American religion. The same trends of immigration and pluralism that have affected all of American religion apply to African-American religion as well. Churches with



An African-American revival meeting, La Forge, Missouri, August 1938. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USF33-011608-M4].

African immigrant congregants and pastors are becoming increasingly prominent in New York and other urban areas, and they will eventually spread to smaller cities and to the South. Many of these feature the kinds of spirit possessions, exorcisms, and supernatural theology that African-American church leaders in the 19th century tried to drive out of their church life; they saw them as too primitive. Catholicism is also an increasingly important part of black religious life, in part because of Afro-Caribbean Catholic immigrants (most obviously Haitians, but black Brazilians and others as well). Then, too, Islam continues to exert a major influence, and draws a substantial number of black American converts, as well as African im-

migrants who come from Islamic traditions. In fifty years historians will be discussing how a once overwhelmingly Protestant group of black churchgoers became much more diverse. This is "back to the future" territory, because that is the kind of religious diversity with which Africans began their enforced sojourn in the Americas.

**Stephens:** Did your teaching of African-American history influence you as you wrote the book?

**Harvey:** My teaching always influences my books, and vice versa, so the short answer is yes. Perhaps even more so for this book, which is meant for classroom use. I had in mind while writing it, "What exactly should my students, or any students in a typical class, know about the particular subject I'm writing about here?" I tried to focus on those essentials and avoid some of the more arcane or esoteric points and debates that my other books have spent much more time on. I also tried hard to write a pretty traditional historical narrative, showing some of the basic stuff historians want to show—change over time, diversity, complexity, etc.

**Stephens:** What was it like to write for a more general audience?

**Harvey:** One big difference here is that I wrote this book as part of a series, the African American History and Culture series published by Rowman and Littlefield. That series already had put out some wonderful books, such as Burton Peretti's history of African-American music, Betty Wood's book about slavery in colonial America, and Chris Waldrep's work on the history of how African Americans have confronted lynching. So I felt the bar was high in terms of producing a work that would respect the scholarly integrity of my subject while also being accessible to readers coming into the book with no background at all. The coeditors of this series, Jacqueline Moore and Nina Mjagkij, put me through about four different drafts of the book. They really focused on making this a general text. I learned an enormous amount about writing more simply and clearly through the process of writing this book, and if I'm lucky, I'll be able to take those lessons and apply them to my future books. Simple and clear prose is awfully hard to write, but wonderful to read.

**Stephens:** Tell us how you went about selecting the primary source documents included in the latter part of the book.

**Harvey:** I wanted something from every time period I covered; I wanted as much diversity as possible in terms of religious traditions; I wanted ample representation of African-American women

as well as men; I wanted different kinds of documents, including sermons, hymns, folktales, memoirs, narratives, and photographs; and I needed documents that didn't cost me a fortune in permissions fees. On that latter point, there are no documents from some major figures, including Martin Luther King, because they are just impossibly costly, and in any case widely available elsewhere. The same goes for Malcolm X. I was very pleased when I learned that Kanye West's publishers were charging a reasonable permissions fee, so I could include his great rap song "Jesus Walks." And I also worked hard to include documents that were really compelling from the 17th and 18th centuries, which of course is difficult, but I think I succeeded in giving the early period a decent representation.

**Stephens:** What are a couple of the most important themes you hope readers take away from *Through the Storm, Through the Night*?

**Harvey:** The richness, diversity, and complexity of the African-American Christian tradition. The long history of that tradition dating back even to before the slave trade; the enormity of the slave trade in terms of shaping the modern world in the Americas; and the important changes that have affected African-American Christianity over time.

Here is a quote from my introduction where I summarize the book's major themes:

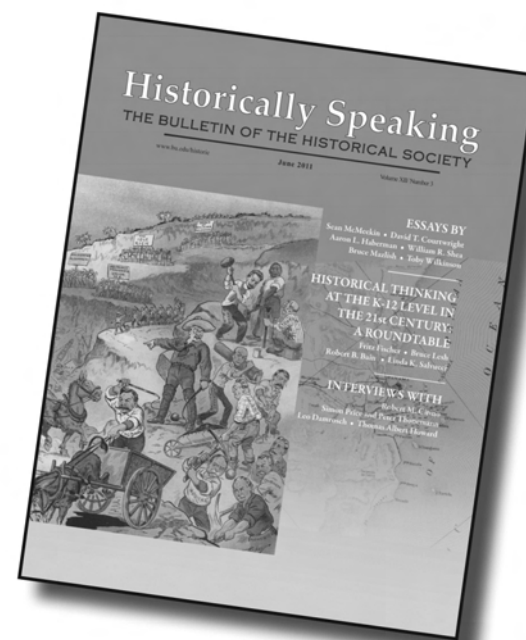
Black religious traditions provided theological, institutional, and personal strategies for cultural survival during bondage and into the era of what was, at best, a partial freedom. Likewise, black religious institutions have contained *within* them the tensions and complexities of African American communal life. Black churchpeople, for example, have fought an ongoing tug-of-war between a drive towards "respectability" in the eyes of the larger white society versus valorizing practices derived from African religious influences. Black Americans adopted Christianity amid a centuries-long critique about the acceptance of the "white man's religion" from the eighteenth century to the present. Moreover, black churches have attracted congregations of widely disparate educational levels, incomes, and worship styles. In short, the history of African American Christianity captures the complexity, strength, and fragility of African American communal institutions set within a country and culture that for centuries denied the humanity of black people.



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