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Author(s): Charles H. Long

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Charles H. Long

PERSPECTIVES FOR A
STUDY OF AFRO-
AMERICAN RELIGION
IN THE UNITED STATES

Americans of African descent have for some time been the subject of countless studies and research projects—projects extending from the physical through the social sciences. The religion of this culture has not been overlooked.¹

Most of the studies of religion have employed the methodology of the social sciences; hardly any of the studies have come to terms with the specifically religious elements in the religion of black Americans. We have not yet seen anything on the order of Pierre Verger's² study of African religion in South America or of Alfred Metraux's³ study of the same phenomenon in the Atlantic islands.

On the contemporary scene, a group of younger blacks are about the task of writing a distinctively "black theology." I refer here

¹ W. E. B. DuBois, ed., *The Negro Church* (Atlanta, Ga.: Atlanta University Press, 1903); Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921); Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro Church* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969); Arthur Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944; London: Oxford University Press, 1944); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962); Howard M. Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970); C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (New York: Beacon Press, 1961); and E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

² Pierre Verger, *Notes sur le culte des Orisa et Vodun à Bahia la Baie de tous les saints au Brésil et à l'ancienne Côte des esclaves en Afrique* (Dakar, 1957).

³ Alfred Metraux, *Le Vaudou haïtien* (Paris, 1958).

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to the works of Joseph Washington (*Black Religion* [Boston, 1961]), James Cone (*Black Theology and Black Power* [New York, 1969]), and to Albert Cleage's sermons (*The Black Messiah* [New York, 1968]). In this enterprise these men place themselves in the religious tradition of David Walker, Henry Garnett, Martin Delaney, and W. E. B. DuBois. They are essentially apologetic theologians working implicitly and explicitly from the Christian theological tradition.

What we have in fact are two kinds of studies: those arising from the social sciences, and an explicitly theological apologetic tradition. This limitation of methodological perspectives has led to a narrowness of understanding and the failure to perceive certain creative possibilities in the black community in America.

One of the most telling examples of this limitation of perspectives in the study of black religion is to be found in Joseph Washington's work cited above. Washington has correctly seen that black religion is not to be understood as a black imitation of the religion of the majority population. His religious norm is Christianity, and the internal norm for Christianity is faith expressing itself in theology. From his analysis he concludes that black religion is not Christian, thus does not embody faith, and therefore has produced no theology. Black religion has, in his view, been more concerned with civil rights and protest, and hardly, if ever, concerned with genuine Christian faith.

I do not wish to take issue with Washington regarding his understanding of Christian faith and theology, for this lies outside the scope of our concerns in this paper. However, a word or two must be said in passing. Washington seems to conceive of Christianity and theology in static terms unrelated to historical experience. He seems to be unaware of the historical situations which were correlative to European and American theology, and he seems equally unaware of the fact that Americans have produced few theologians of the variety that would meet his norm. In short, his critique of black religion from the stance of Christian theology is blunted by the lack of his historical understanding of theology.

But now, to the point which is most relevant for our discussion: the distinctive nature of black religion. Washington's insights here are very accurate, for he shows in his work how folkloric materials, social protest, and Negro fraternalism, along with biblical imagery, are all aspects of black religion. He experiences a difficulty here, for he is unable to deal with religion outside of the normative framework of Christian theology. But even if one is to have a

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theology, it must arise from religion, something which is prior to theology.

I have felt the need for some time to present a systematic study of black religion—a kind of initial ordering of the religious experiences and expressions of the black communities in America. Such a study should not be equated with Christianity, or any other religion for that matter. It is rather an attempt to see what kind of images and meanings lie behind the religious experiences of the black communities in America. While recognizing the uniqueness of this community, I am also working as a historian of religions, and thus the context for my interpretation is the variety of the religious traditions of mankind.

I should like in this paper to present three interrelated perspectives for a study of black religion from the point of view of a historian of religion. These perspectives constitute symbolic images as well as methodological principles. They are:

- A. Africa as historical reality and religious image.
- B. The involuntary presence of the black community in America.
- C. The experience and symbol of God in the religious experience of blacks.

A. AFRICA AS HISTORICAL REALITY AND RELIGIOUS IMAGE

It is a historical fact that the existence of the black communities in America is due to the slave trade of numerous European countries from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (slaves were still being illegally smuggled into the United States as late as the 1880s). The issue of the persistence of African elements in the black community is a hotly debated issue. On the one hand, we have the positions of E. Franklin Frazier and W. E. B. DuBois,⁴ emphasizing the lack of any significant persisting elements of Africanism in America. Melville Herskovits held this same position but reversed his position in the *Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, 1958), where he places a greater emphasis on the persistence of African elements among the descendants of the slaves in North America. One of the issues in this discussion had to do with the comparative level of the studies. Invariably, the norm for comparison was the black communities in the Atlantic islands and in South America. In the latter the African elements are very distinctive, and, in the case of Brazil, Africans have gone back and

⁴ See W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, 1903).

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forth between Africa and Brazil.⁵ African languages are still spoken by blacks in Brazil. Indeed, Pierre Verger first became interested in Yoruba religion when he saw it being practiced in South America!

It is obvious that nothing of this sort has existed in the United States. The slave system of the United States systematically broke down the linguistic and cultural pattern of the slaves, but even a protagonist for the loss of all Africanisms, such as E. Franklin Frazier, acknowledges the persistence of "shout songs," African rhythm, and dance in American culture. Frazier, and in this matter, DuBois, while acknowledging such elements did not see these elements of ultimate significance, for they could not see these forms playing an important role in the social cohesion of the black community. Without resolving this discussion, another issue needs to be raised. The persistence of elements of what some anthropologists have called "soft culture" means that given even the systematic breakdown of African cultural forms in the history of North America slavery, the slaves did not confront America with a religious *tabula rasa*. If not the content of culture, a characteristic mode of orienting and perceiving reality has probably persisted. We know, for example, that a great majority of the slaves came from West Africa, and we also know from the studies of Daryll Forde that West Africa is a cultural as well as a geographical unit.⁶ Underlying the empirical diversity of languages, religions, and social form, there is, according to Forde, a structural unity discernible in language and religious forms.⁷ With the breakdown of the empirical forms of language and religion as determinants for the social group, this persisting structural mode and the common situation as slaves in America may be the basis for the persistence of an African style among the descendants of the Africans.

In addition to this, in the accounts of the slaves and their owners we read of "meetings" which took place secretly in the woods. It is obvious that these "meetings" were not the practice of the masters' religion. They were related to what the slaves themselves called "conjuring," and the connotation reminds one of Voodoo rites in Haiti.

⁵ See Verger.

⁶ Daryll Forde, "The Cultural Map of West Africa: Successive Adaptations to Tropical Forests and Grassland," in *Cultures and Societies of Africa*, ed. S. and P. Ottenberg (New York, 1960).

⁷ Joseph Greenberg makes a similar argument for the structural similarity of West African languages in his *Studies in African Linguistic Classification* (New Haven, Conn., 1955).

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Added to this is the precise manner in which, by being a slave, a black man, one was isolated from any self-determined legitimacy in the society of which one was a part and was recognized by one's physiological characteristics. This constituted a complexity of experience revolving around the relationship between one's physical being and one's origins. So even if he had no conscious memory of Africa, the image of Africa played an enormous part in the religion of the black man. The image of Africa, an image related to historical beginnings, has been one of the primordial religious images of great significance. It constitutes the religious revalorization of the land, a place, where the natural and ordinary gestures of the black man were and could be authenticated. In this connection, one can trace almost every nationalistic movement among the blacks and find Africa to be the dominating and guiding image. Even among religious groups not strongly nationalistic the image of Africa or Ethiopia still has relevance.⁸ This is present in such diverse figures as Richard Allen, who organized the African Methodist Episcopal church in the early nineteenth century, through Martin Delaney in the late nineteenth century, and then again in Marcus Garvey's⁹ "back to Africa movement" of the immediate post-World War I period, and finally the taking up of this issue again among black leaders of our own time.

The image of Africa as it appears in black religion is unique, for the black community in America is a landless people. Unlike the American Indian, the land was not taken from him, and unlike the black Africans in South Africa or Rhodesia, his land is not occupied by groups whom he considers aliens. His image of the land points to the religious meaning of land even in the absence of these forms of authentication. It thus emerges as an image which is always invested with historical and religious possibilities.

B. THE INVOLUNTARY PRESENCE OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY IN AMERICA

Implied in the discussion concerning the land and the physiological characteristics of the black is the significance attributed to his

⁸ See especially Edward W. Blyden's *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (London, 1887). Blyden, though born in the Virgin Islands and ordained as a Presbyterian minister, was one of the early leaders in pan-Africanism. It is interesting to note that he set the problem within a religious context. The publication of his work is directly related to the problems created in the 1840s by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law and the Dred Scott decision of the United States Supreme Court.

⁹ See Edmund D. Cronon, *Black Moses* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962).

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meaning in America. His stance has, on the one hand, been necessitated by historical conditions, and on the other hand, been grasped as creative possibility. From the very beginning, his presence in the country has been involuntary; he was brought to America in chains, and this country has attempted to keep him in this condition in one way or another. His very presence as a *human being* in the United States has always constituted a threat to the majority population. From the point of view of the majority population, he has been simply and purely a legal person, first as a slave defined in terms of property, and then, after the abolition of chattel property, as a citizen who had to seek legal redress before he could use the common facilities of the country—water fountains, public accommodations, restaurants, schools, etc. There is no need to repeat this history; it is too well known, and the point I wish to make is more subtle than these specific issues, important as they may be.

In addition to the image and historical reality of Africa one must add, as another persisting datum, the involuntary presence and orientation as a religious meaning. I have stated elsewhere the importance of the involuntary structure of the religious consciousness in the terms of oppugnancy.¹⁰ In the case of the slaves America presented a bizarre reality, not simply because of the novelty of a radical change of status and culture, but equally because their presence as slaves pointed to a radical contradiction within the dominant culture itself. The impact of America was a discovery, but one had little ability to move from the bizarre reality of discovery to the level of general social rules of conduct, which happens in the case of other communities presented with an ultimate discovery. In addition to this, to normalize the condition of slavery would be to deny his existence as a human being.

The slave had to come to terms with the opaqueness of his condition and at the same time oppose it. He had to experience the truth of his negativity and at the same time transform and create *an-other* reality. Given the limitations imposed upon him, he created on the level of his religious consciousness. Not only did this transformation produce new cultural forms, but its significance must be understood from the point of view of the creativity of the transforming process itself.

Three short illustrations of this phenomenon must suffice at this point. Listen to this spiritual:

¹⁰ See Charles H. Long, "Prolegomenon to a Religious Hermeneutic," *History of Religions* 6, no. 3 (February 1967): 254–64.

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He's so high, you can't get over him
He's so low, you can't get under him
So round, you can't get around him
You got to go right through the door

or this poem by a black poet:

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing
To make a poet black and bid him sing

or a folk aphorism:

What do you mean I gotta do that
Ain't but two things I got to do—Be black and die.

The musical phenomenon, the blues, is another expression of the same consciousness. What is portrayed here is a religious consciousness that has experienced the "hardness" of life, whether the form of that reality be the slave system, God, or simply life itself. It is from such a consciousness that the power to resist and yet maintain one's humanity has emerged. Though the worship and religious life of blacks have often been referred to as forms of escapism, one must always remember that there has always been an integral relationship between the "hardness" of life and the ecstasy of religious worship. It is, in my opinion, an example of what Gaston Bachelard described in Hegelian language as the lithic imagination. Bachelard had reference to the imaginary structure of consciousness that arises in relationship to the natural form of the stone and the manner in which the volitional character of human consciousness is related to this imaginary form.¹¹ The black community in America has confronted the reality of the historical situation as immutable, impenetrable, but this experience has not produced passivity; it has, rather, found expression as forms of the involuntary and transformative nature of the religious consciousness. In connection with this point, let me illustrate by returning to the meaning of the image and historical reality of Africa.

Over and over again this image has ebbed and flowed in the religious consciousness. It has found expression in music, dance, and political theorizing. There has been an equally persistent war against this image in the religion of black folk. This war against the image of Africa and blackness can be seen in the political and social movements connected with the stratagems of segregation and integration. Even more telling is the history of the names by

¹¹ See Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les reveries de la volonte* (Paris, 1948).

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which this community has chosen to call itself. From African to colored, to Negro, Afro-American, and presently black. The history of these designations can be seen as a religious history through which this community was coming to terms with a primary symbol of opacity.

Recall the words of G. van der Leeuw. In speaking of religious experience, he said, "Religious experience, in other terms, is concerned with a 'somewhat.' But this assertion often means no more than this 'Somewhat' is merely a vague 'something,' and in order that man may be able to make more significant statements about this 'Somewhat,' it must force itself upon him, oppose it to him as being Something Other. Thus the first statement we can make about religion is that it is a highly exceptional and extremely impressive 'Other.'" ¹² From the point of view of religious history, one could say that this community in its own self-interpretation has moved from a vague "somewhat" to the religious experience of a highly exceptional and *extremely impressive* "Other." The contemporary expressions of black power attest to this fact, and the universalizing of this notion in terms of pan-Africanism, negritude, or neo-Marxian and Christian conceptions must equally be noted.

The meaning of the involuntary structure or the opacity of the religious symbol has within this community held together eschatological hopes and the archaic religious consciousness. In both secular and religious groups, new expressions such as Moorish Temple, Black Jews, Black Muslims retain an archaic structure in their religious consciousness, and this structure is never quite settled for it is there as a datum to be deciphered in the context of their present experience.

C. THE EXPERIENCE AND SYMBOL OF GOD

The sources for my interpretation of the experience of the holy in this community are from the folkloric tradition. By this, I mean an oral tradition which exists in its integrity as an oral tradition the writing down of which is a concession to scholarship.

These sources are slave narratives, sermons, the words and music of spirituals and the blues, the cycle of Brer Rabbit, and High John, the Conqueror stories. These materials reveal a range of

¹² G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner (London, 1933), p. 23.

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religious meanings extending from trickster-transformer hero to High Gods.

To be sure, the imagery of the Bible plays a large role in the symbolic presentations, but to move from this fact to any simplistic notion of blacks as slaves or former slaves converted to Christianity would, I think, miss several important religious meanings.

The biblical imagery was used because it was at hand; it was adapted to and invested with the experience of the slave. Strangely enough, it was the slave who gave a religious meaning to the notions of freedom and land. The deliverance of the children of Israel from the Egyptians became an archetype which enabled him to live with promise.

God for this community appears as an all powerful and moral deity, though one hardly ever knows why he has willed this or that. God is never, or hardly ever, blamed for the situation of man, for somehow in an inscrutable manner there is a reason for all this. By and large a fundamental distinction is made between God and Jesus Christ. To the extent that the language of Christianity is used, black Americans have held to the trinitarian distinction, but adherence to this distinction has been for experiential rather than dogmatic reasons. Historians of religion have known for a long time that the Supreme Being appears in differing forms. To be sure, God, the first person of the trinity, is a powerful creator deity.

It is not so much the dogma of the trinity as it is the modalities of experience of the trinity which is most important. The experience of God is thus placed within the context of the other images and experiences of black religion. God, as first person of the trinity, is, of course, a powerful Creator Supreme deity. Though biblical language is used to speak of his historical presence and intervention in history, we neither have a clear Hebraic nor what has become a Christian interpretation of history. I am not implying that the deity is a *deus otiosus*, for there is an acceptance of historical reality, but neither in its Hebraic nor traditional Christian mode. We must remember that the historicity of these two traditions was related to the possession of a land, and this has not been the case for blacks in America. In one sense, it is possible to say that their history in America has always presented to them a situation of crisis. The intervention of the deity into their community has not been synonymous with the confirmation of the reality of their being within the structures of America. God

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has been more often a transformer of their consciousness, the basis for a resource which enabled them to maintain the human image without completely acquiescing to the norms of the majority population. He provided a norm of self-criticism which was not derivative from those who enslaved them. I cite two examples as illustrations:

When I was very small my people thought I was going to die. Mama used to tell my sister that I was puny and that she didn't think that she would be able to raise me. I used to dream nearly all the time and see all kinds of wild-looking animals. I would nearly always get scared and nervous.

Some time later I got heavy one day and began to die. For days I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep; even the water I drank seemed to swell in my mouth. A voice said to me one day, "Nora you haven't done what you promised." And again it said, "You saw the sun rise, but you shall die before it goes down." I began to pray. I was making up my bed. A light seemed to come down from heaven, and it looked like it just split me open from my head to my feet. A voice said to me, "Ye are freed and free indeed. My son set you free. Behold, I give you everlasting life."

During all this time I was just dumb. I couldn't speak or move. I heard a moaning sound, and a voice said, "Follow me, my little one, and I will show you the marvelous works of God." I got up, it seems, and started to traveling. I was not my natural self but a little angel. We went and came to a sea of glass, and it was mingled with fire. I opened my mouth and began to pray, "Lord, I will perish in there." Then I saw a path that led through the fire, I journeyed in this path and came to a green pasture where there were a lot of sheep. They were all of the same size and bleated in a mournful tone. A voice spoke to me, and it sounded like a roar of thunder: "Ye are my workmanship and the creation of my hand. I will drive all fears away. Go, and I go with you. You have a deed to your name, and you shall never perish."¹³

* * *

Everybody seemed to be getting along well but poor me. I told him so. I said, "Lord, it looks like you come to everybody's house but mine. I never bother my neighbors or cause any disturbance. I have lived as it is becoming a poor widow woman to live and yet, Lord, it looks like I have a harder time than anybody." When I said this, something told me to turn around and look. I put my bundle down and looked towards the east part of the world. A voice spoke to me as plain as day, but it was inward and said, "I am a time-God working after the counsel of my own will. In due time I will bring all things to you. Remember and cause your heart to sing.

When God struck me dead with his power I was living on Fourteenth Avenue. It was the year of the Centennial. I was in my house alone, and I declare unto you, when his power struck me I died. I fell out on the floor flat on my back. I could neither speak nor move, for my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth; my jaws were locked and my limbs were stiff.¹⁴

¹³ Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead*, Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves, with a foreword by Paul Radin (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), pp. 62-63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

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These two narratives are illustrative of the inner dynamics of the conversion experience. The narratives combine and interweave the ordinary events with the transformation of the religious consciousness. It is not merely a case of God acting in history, for the historical events are not the locus of the activity, but then neither do we have a complete lack of concern for historical events in favor of a mystification of the consciousness. It is the combination of these two structures that is distinctive in these narratives; clues such as these might help us to understand the specific nature of the black religious consciousness.

But this structure of the deity is present in non-Christian movements among the blacks; the transforming power of the deity may be seen among the Black Muslims and the Black Jews. This quality of the presence of the deity has enabled blacks to affirm the historical mode by seeing it more in terms of an initiatory structure than in terms of a progressivistic or evolutionary understanding of temporality.

Continuing with the Christian language of the trinity, Jesus has been experienced more in the form of a dema-deity¹⁵ than as conquering hero. One could make the case that this understanding of Jesus Christ has always been present in the history of the Western church, but it is clear that this image of the Christ has not been experienced as a symbol of the total Western culture since the seventeenth century. Christ as fellow sufferer, as the little child, as the companion, as the man who understands—these symbols of Christ have been dominant. For example, the spirituals:

I told Jesus it would be all right if he changed my name
Jesus told me that the world would hate me if he changed my name

or

Poor little Jesus boy, made him to be born in a manger.
World treated him so mean
Treats me mean too. . . .

But there is more than the biblical imagery as a datum. In the folklore we see what appears as the trickster, transformer hero. More than often he appears in the Brer Rabbit cycle of stories,

¹⁵ Adolf E. Jensen defined this religious structure as a result of his researches in Ceram. See his *Hainuwele* (Frankfurt, 1939) and *Myth and Cult among Primitive People* (Chicago, 1963). I do not wish to say that Jesus Christ is understood in any complete sense as a dema-deity in black religion; I am saying that it is from this religious structure that one should begin the deciphering of the meaning of Jesus. Essential to this structure is the notion of the deity as companion and creator, a deity related more to the human condition than deities of the sky, and the subjection of this deity to death at the hands of men.

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which seem related to similar West Africa stories of Ananse, the Spider.

This is one of the cycles of the Brer Rabbit stories:¹⁶ Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Brer Wolf were experiencing a season of drought. They met to decide the proper action to take. It was decided that they should dig a well so that they would have a plenteous supply of water. Brer Rabbit said that he thought this was a very good plan, although he did not wish to participate in the digging of the well because he said that he arose early in the morning and drank the dew from the grass, and thus did not wish to participate in the arduous task of digging. Brer Fox and Brer Wolf proceeded with their task and completed the digging of the deep well. After the well was dug, Brer Rabbit arose early each morning and went to the well and drank his fill, pretending all the time that he was drinking the morning dew. After a while, Brer Fox and Brer Wolf became suspicious of Brer Rabbit and set about to spy upon him. Sure enough, they caught him one morning drinking from their well. They subjected him to some punishment, which we need not go into for the point of the story has been made.

Brer Rabbit is not simply lazy and clever; it is clear that he feels that he has something else to do—that life cannot be dealt with in purely conventional terms and committee meetings. In many respects the preacher in the black community exhibits many of the traits of Brer Rabbit, and it was often the preacher who kept alive the possibility for another life, or who protested and affirmed by doing nothing.

One other instance should be mentioned: High John, the Conqueror. Now it is stated explicitly in the folklore that High John came dancing over the waves from Africa, or that he was in the hold of the slave ship. High John is a flamboyant character. He possesses great physical strength and conquers more by an audacious display of his power than through any subtlety or cunning. He is the folkloric side of a conquering Christ, though with less definite goals.

The essential elements in the expression and experience of God is his transforming ability. This is true in the case of God as absolute moral ruler as well as in Brer Rabbit or High John, the Conqueror. Insofar as society at large was not an agent of transformation, the inner resources of consciousness and the internal

¹⁶ See T. F. Crane, "Plantation Folklore," in *The Negro and His Folklore* (Austin, Tex., 1967), pp. 157-67.

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structures of his own history and community became not simply the locus for new symbols but the basis for a new consciousness for the black.

It is therefore the religious consciousness of the black in America which is the repository of who he is, where he has been, and where he is going. A purely existential analysis cannot do justice to this religious experience. Probably a new interpretation of American religion would come about if careful attention is given to the religious history of this strange American.