

NEW WORLD A-COMING

Black Religion and Racial Identity
During the Great Migration



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History | Religion

New World A-Coming Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration

BY JUDITH WEISENFELD

Reading Guide

Winner of the 2017 Albert J. Raboteau Book Prize for the Best Book in Africana Religions

Shows how early 20th-century resistance to conventional racial categorization contributed to broader discussions in black America that still resonate today

When Joseph Nathaniel Beckles registered for the draft in the 1942, he rejected the racial categories presented to him and persuaded the registrar to cross out the check mark she had placed next to Negro and substitute “Ethiopian Hebrew.” “God did not make us Negroes,” declared religious leaders in black communities of the early twentieth-century urban North. They insisted that so-called Negroes are, in reality, Ethiopian Hebrews, Asiatic Muslims, or raceless children of God. Rejecting conventional American racial classification, many black southern migrants and immigrants from the Caribbean embraced these alternative visions of black history, racial identity, and collective future, thereby reshaping the black religious and racial landscape.

Focusing on the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, Father Divine’s Peace Mission Movement, and a number of congregations of Ethiopian Hebrews, Judith Weisenfeld argues that the appeal of these groups lay not only in the new religious opportunities membership provided, but also in the novel ways they formulated a religio-racial identity. Arguing that members of these groups understood their religious and racial identities as divinely ordained and inseparable, the book examines how this sense of self shaped their conceptions of their bodies, families, religious and social communities, space and place, and political sensibilities.

Weisenfeld draws on extensive archival research and incorporates a rich array of sources to highlight the experiences of average members. The book demonstrates that the efforts by members of these movements to contest conventional racial categorization contributed to broader discussions in black America about the nature of racial identity and the collective future of black people that still resonate today.

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INTRODUCTION

The introduction explores the historical context in which the movements that are the book's focus emerged. Highlighting the impact of the African American Great Migration from the South to northern cities and of immigration from the Caribbean, the section locates the religious transformations of the period in the broader context of the cultural changes migration and immigration spurred. The section also introduces the frameworks of religio-racial identity and religio-racial movements that serve as the basis for the book's analysis of the new understandings of self, collective history, and communal future the movements promoted. Finally, the introduction argues that the religio-racial movements were part of broader cultural currents among Black people in America that fostered race pride, challenged conventional race histories, and offered new ways of thinking about collective identity.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the author mean by “religio-racial movements” and “religio-racial identity”?
2. How did the Great Migration contribute to the development of religio-racial movements among Black residents of the urban North?
3. Why did many members of Black communities in the early twentieth-century United States believe that “race names” had religious, political, and social significance?

Assignment / Class Exercise

Use the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's African American Migration Experience site (<http://www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm>) to locate Alec Brown Bey's path from South Carolina to Philadelphia in broader context and to consider the impact of the population shifts of the early twentieth century on Black communities.

- Look at the maps of migration of African Americans from the South to northern cities and charts of the growth in the number of Black residents in northern cities: (<http://www.inmotionaame.org/gallery/?migration=8&topic=10&type=map>)
- Look at charts showing the countries of origin of immigrants to the U.S. from the Caribbean:

(<http://www.inmotionaame.org/gallery/?migration=10&topic=9&type=map>)

PART ONE**PART ONE**
NARRATIVES

This part introduces two chapters examining the narratives of identity the founders and leaders of the religio-racial movements promoted. Most observers at the time, as well as modern scholars of the movement, point to the charisma of Moorish Science Temple founder Noble Drew Ali, Ethiopian Hebrew congregation rabbis Arnold Josiah Ford and Wentworth Arthur Matthew, Nation of Islam founder W. D. Fard and his successor Elijah Muhammad, and the Peace Mission's Father Divine to explain the appeal of the movements. This section introduction argues that while those who embraced new religio-racial identities were drawn by the charisma of the leader, it was the persuasiveness of the story of Black history and collective identity combined with the power of the leader's personality that drew people to the movements and motivated their profound commitment to them.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do the narratives of identity promoted within the religio-racial movements have in common with one another?
2. How does examining the distinctive aspects of each group's religious narrative of racial identity help us to understand what drew people to the religio-racial movements?
3. How does a consideration of the charisma of the founder or leader help us to understand what drew people to the religio-racial movements and what are the limits of focusing on the personality of leaders to explain the appeal of these groups for members?

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER ONE
GEOGRAPHIES OF RACE AND RELIGION

This chapter examines the narratives of religio-racial identity and history put forward by leaders of Ethiopian Hebrew congregations and the Moorish Science Temple. It argues that, although these movements offered distinctive accounts of Black history and identity, they held in common an approach to understanding divinely ordained identity through sacred geography. In the case of black Hebrews, Ethiopia framed their narrative, and a connection to Morocco shaped the Moorish Science Temple's understanding of history and identity. The chapter also considers the connection between the life histories and hagiographies of the founders and the narratives of religio-racial identity.

Questions for Discussion

1. How did Arnold Josiah Ford, Wentworth Matthew, and other leaders of Ethiopian Hebrew congregations describe their religio-racial identity in terms of their relationship to Africa and to Judaism?
2. What texts did Ethiopian Hebrews draw on to explain their religio-racial identity?
3. How did Noble Drew Ali describe his religio-racial identity in terms of a relationship to Africa and to Islam?
4. What texts did Noble Drew Ali use to support his understanding of his religio-racial identity?

Assignment / Class Exercise

Have the students look at some of the textual sources for Ethiopian Hebrew and Moorish Science Temple religio-racial identity and discuss how the movements' leaders used scripture to formulate and promote their theology.

Psalm 68:31; 1 Kings 10:1-3; II Chronicles 9; 2 Esdras 13:40-50

The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple, Chapters XLV, XLVII, and XLVIII
(<https://www.loc.gov/resource/amedsaid1831.dw019>)

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER TWO
SACRED TIME AND DIVINE HISTORIES

While the Moorish Science Temple and Ethiopian Hebrew congregations grounded their understanding of divinely ordained religio-racial identity in connection to sacred geographies, the Nation of Islam and the Peace Mission privileged notions of sacred time to interpret their histories and collective identities. This chapter examines the Nation of Islam's theology of time in which Wallace D. Fard, who followers came to see as Allah, positioned Black people as the earth's original creations and the true owners. Father Divine, who followers also believed was God, promoted a different approach to sacred time, preaching that his embodiment inaugurated an eternal utopic Kingdom of God. As with Chapter 1, this chapter attends to how narratives about the founders, in this case focusing on their divinity, shaped the movements' broader theologies.

Questions for Discussion

1. How did time function as a theological category in the Nation of Islam and Father Divine's Peace Mission?
2. How did W. D. Fard, Elijah Muhammad, and Father Divine use theologies of time and history to construct their visions of religio-racial identity?
3. How did Fard, Muhammad, and Divine talk about the relationship of time to specific geographic locations (Mecca and the United States, for example) for understanding religio-racial identity?

Assignment / Class Exercise

Have the students read the chapter titled "Devil" in Elijah Muhammad's *Message to the Blackman in America* and Father Divine's sermon, "Since God Has Come in a Bodily Form, You Need Not Worry Anymore" and compare and contrast ideas about the divine, evil, time, race, and nation in the two movements.

Message to the Blackman:

https://books.google.com/books?id=mdtMpTzbYZP4C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Father Divine's Sermon: https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://peacemission.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/word_of_god_revealed__pdf_.pdf&hl=en_US)

PART TWO**PART TWO**
SELFHOOD

This part introduces two chapters that turn from tracing the leaders' development of the movements' theologies to exploring how members' embrace of new religio-racial identities transformed their sense of self. Arguing that embodied practices of self-making were central to the process by which new members inhabited their religio-racial identities, the section introduces one chapter focusing on practices members believed restored their religio-racial bodies to their true nature and another chapter that considers the groups' distinctive approaches to the maintenance of religio-racial bodies.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why were embodied expressions of religio-racial identity important for members of the movements?
2. What does the author mean in describing these expressions as “performative work”?

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER THREE
RELIGIO-RACIAL SELF-FASHIONING

This chapter examines the embodied practices and strategies members of religio-racial movements adopted to restore what they believed were their true and divinely ordained identities. The chapter explores cases of members of the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam rejecting names grounded in slavery and adopting individual or family names that provided connection to a particular religio-racial history. In the case of the Peace Mission, members took on spiritual names to mark their new spiritual status in preparation for the utopic future. The chapter also considers how some of the religio-racial movements, particularly the Peace Mission and Moorish Science Temple, fostered alternative ways of thinking about skin color that separated them from conventional American racial categories and located them in a new religio-racial system. It discusses the adoption of particular clothing styles by members of Ethiopian Hebrew congregations, the Moorish Science Temple, and Nation of Islam that members of some groups believed helped to restore the body to its original religio-racial state.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why was it important to members in some of the groups to change personal names and how did those name changes relate to religio-racial theologies?
2. How did members of some of the groups understand skin color and clothing in theological terms?

Assignment / Class Exercise

Have students examine Alexander Alland's photographs of the Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation and discuss the relationship of clothing to religio-racial identity.

Alexander Alland, "Ethiopian Hebrew Series" (1940)

https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/search/index?filters%5BnamePart_mtxt_s%5D%5B%5D=Commandment+Keepers+Ethiopian+Hebrew+Congregation+%28Harlem%2C+New+York%2C+N.Y.%29&keywords=&sort=sortString+asc#

Have the class read the letter members of the Nation of Islam wrote requesting a new name and look at the names of Peace Mission members in the 1940 Census to facilitate a discussion about different approaches to changing names within the groups.

NOI Letter:

<https://www.elijahmuhammadspeaks.com/saviour-letter>

Peace Mission Residents of 36-38 W. 123rd Street, New York in the 1940 Census:

[https://1940census.archives.gov/search/?search.result_type=image&search.state=NY&search.county=New+York+County&search.city=&search.street=123rd+W#filename=m-t0627-02665-00123.tif&name=31-1707B&type=image&state=NY&index=34&pages=38&bm_all_text=Bookmark\)](https://1940census.archives.gov/search/?search.result_type=image&search.state=NY&search.county=New+York+County&search.city=&search.street=123rd+W#filename=m-t0627-02665-00123.tif&name=31-1707B&type=image&state=NY&index=34&pages=38&bm_all_text=Bookmark)

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FOUR
MAINTAINING THE RELIGIO-RACIAL BODY

This chapter builds on the previous chapter's discussion of how members of the movements inhabited their religio-racial identities through embodied practices of self-fashioning and considers the means by which members sought to maintain their restored religio-racial bodies. The chapter examines the new dietary regimes and health practices each group promoted as essential for continued connection to religio-racial identity. It also discusses approaches to healing the religio-racial body from illnesses with spiritual and social sources and considers members' attitudes toward death in light of their religio-racial commitments.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does each group's approach to diet, health, and healing relate to its religio-racial theology?
2. How did the religio-racial approaches to diet, health, and healing the groups developed respond to broader American cultural ideas about race and members' experiences of racism?
3. What challenges did members face in implementing these approaches in daily life?

Assignment / Class Exercise

Read Shakeela Hassan's description of eating dinner at Elijah and Clara Muhammad's house (the memory is at the end of Winnifred Sullivan's portrait of the Pakistani immigrant doctor who created the fezzes Elijah Muhammad began wearing in the 1950s). Prepare and eat Clara Muhammad's Navy Bean Soup recipe and discuss the Nation of Islam's ideas about diet and health.

<http://frequencies.ssrc.org/2011/09/20/shakeela-hassan/>

View film footage of Father Divine presiding at a Peace Mission Holy Communion Banquet in the 1930s and compare the approach to food to that in the Nation of Islam.

https://youtu.be/We_QdXen3kg

PART THREE**PART THREE**
COMMUNITY

This part introduces three chapters that examine the implications for broader community formations of individual embrace of a new religio-racial identity. It argues that, while individuals committed to a particular account of Black history and identity for deeply personal reasons, such decisions affected many beyond the individual. The section introduces a chapter on how religio-racial commitments shaped family configurations, another on members' attitudes toward space and place and political sensibilities, and a final chapter on the place of the religio-racial movements in the broader social worlds of Black communities in the United States.

Questions for Discussion

- Why do you think it is useful for understanding the religio-racial movements to connect individual beliefs about religio-racial identity to the broader contexts of family and community?

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER FIVE
MAKING THE RELIGIO-RACIAL FAMILY

This chapter examines the influence of religio-racial understandings of history and individual identity on family configurations. It argues that, in light of racialized discourses about Black family life, members of the movements understood their approach to marriage, family, and children to have both spiritual and social significance. The chapter discusses the theological grounding of the commitment to in-group marriage in the Moorish Science Temple, Nation of Islam, and Ethiopian Hebrew congregations and the strategies members took to transmitting their beliefs, practices, and identities across generations to their children. While Peace Mission members rejected marriage and family in favor of sex-segregated, celibate, and communal life, their religio-racial commitments made them part of a new family as children of Father Divine.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does each group's approach to sexuality, marriage, and family relate to its religio-racial theology?
2. In what ways do the theologies and practices of the religio-racial movements conform to or challenge broader cultural and religious views of sexuality, marriage, and family?

Assignment / Class Exercise

Watch a film clip by Marianne Glickman about the Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation and have the students discuss the transmission of Ethiopian Hebrew identity across generations and the challenges those interviewed describe about their experiences growing up as Ethiopian Hebrews.

The Commandment Keepers

<https://youtu.be/stKpJhTYn9I>

Read "Women and Children" (chapter 14) in *The Supreme Wisdom* and discuss the Nation of Islam's understanding of gender and family in relation to the group's religio-racial theology.

The Supreme Wisdom

http://edan.si.edu/slideshow/viewer/?damspath=/Public_Sets/NMAAHC/NMAAHC_Slideshows/2014_150_11_11

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SIX**THE RELIGIO-RACIAL POLITICS OF SPACE AND PLACE**

This chapter explores the complex interaction of religio-racial identity, political sensibilities and attitudes toward the American nation, and members' approaches to urban space. It examines how members of the Moorish Science Temple worked to produce urban enclaves and distinctly Moorish worship spaces and practices to situate themselves as part of a diverse American religious and political landscape even while speaking out against racial and religious discrimination. In contrast, the Nation of Islam rejected America as a wicked and corrupt nation, and the chapter discusses members' efforts to isolate themselves and shore up their religio-racial community in preparation for Allah's coming judgment. The chapter also examines the Peace Mission movement's work to transform urban space into the kingdom of Father Divine through the establishment of communal residences. Finally, the chapter attends to Ethiopian Hebrews' quest for their own colonies, discussing an attempt to establish a community in Ethiopia and another on Long Island, New York.

Questions for Discussion

1. How did the groups' respective religio-racial theologies shape members' understandings of citizenship, belonging, and approaches to political participation in the United States?
2. How did the members of the religio-racial movements organize their homes and places of worship in relation to their theologies?

Assignment / Class Exercise

Watch a video of a discussion of the former sites of Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation synagogues and discuss members' reflections on the meaning of the group's presence in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s.

Tour of the Former Commandment Keepers Congregation

<https://youtu.be/YKuCy-4K-gU>

Read Noble Drew Ali's "Additional Laws for the Moorish Americans," in *Koran Questions for Moorish Americans* and discuss the relationship of Moorish Science Temple theology to Drew Ali's laws governing members' conduct as Americans.

Koran Questions for Moorish Americans

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/amedsaid1831.dw021/?sp=9&r=-0.142,0.336,1.352,0.819,0>

Have students search and browse the FBI files for the Moorish Science Temple, W. D. Fard, Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam, and Father Divine and discuss government surveillance of religious groups and the FBI's interpretation of the place of the religio-racial movements in American life.

FBI Records: The Vault

<https://vault.fbi.gov/>

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER SEVEN
*COMMUNITY, CONFLICT, AND THE BOUNDARIES OF
BLACK RELIGION*

This chapter charts discussions and debates in Black communities about the religious, political, and social implications of the emergence of the religio-racial movements. It argues that, although the numbers of members remained small when compared to membership in the Christian churches that dominated Black religious life in America, the movements had an impact beyond numbers. The chapter examines responses to the religio-racial movements among mainstream Black Protestant clergy and congregants, prominent Holiness and Pentecostal clergy, and journalists in the Black press. The discussion reveals how debate about the movements served as a means for outsiders to define and defend their own visions of Black collective religious and racial identity.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did some outsiders to the religio-racial movements view their existence as a problem for African American communities?
2. What kinds of religious, political, and social arguments did opponents of the movements make to persuade others of their view? Were there difference between the arguments Black and white commentators made and, if so, what were they?
3. How did the media help to promote outsiders' interpretations of the religio-racial movements?

Assignment / Class Exercise

Watch the *March of Time* newsreel about Father Divine and the Peace Mission and analyze how image, editing, sound, and narration work to produce an argument about the group, its theology, and its place in American society.

Father Divine, *The March of Time* (1936)

<https://youtu.be/JNLNrNxPmDA>

CONCLUSION

The conclusion reviews the book's main arguments about the theologies, practices, community formations, and political concerns of the religio-racial movements. It considers the reasons the groups thrived in first half of the 20th century and why their cultural influence became less powerful after the 1950s. The concluding discussion further examines the implications for the study of race and religion in American history of the book's examination of the religio-racial movements as significant arenas for theorizing and enacting religio-racial identity.

Questions for Discussion

1. What changes in American culture in the second half of the twentieth century contributed to the decline in appeal of the religio-racial movements?
2. What do we learn about race and religion in America from exploring the theologies, practices, and experiences of members of the religio-racial movements?

Assignment / Class Exercise

Have students bring in a primary source related to the activities of one of the religio-racial movements today. Consider continuities and changes in the approach to religio-racial identity from the early twentieth century to today.

Have students bring in a primary source related to a group not examined in the book and discuss whether and why they believe it should be considered a religio-racial movement.