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Foreword to Old Ship of Zion

Vincent L. Wimbush
Claremont Graduate University

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Old Ship of Zion

The Afro-Baptist Ritual
in the African Diaspora

WALTER F. PITTS

With a Foreword by Vincent L. Wimbush

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FOREWORD

Walter F. Pitts died July 20, 1991. I did not know him personally; I came to know only a part of him through the manuscript—obviously an important part of his life—that has been transformed into the book now before the reader. If that which is created is in the image of its creator, I suspect that had I met Walter Pitts I probably would have liked him very much; I know I would have been impressed by him, and would have learned a great deal from him.

At first, when I was asked by Oxford University Press to review Pitts's manuscript while it was under consideration for publication, I remember thinking that I really could not afford the time to take on more commitments. Besides, although I have taught courses in, read widely, and pursue scholarship in African-American religious traditions, it is not my primary field of specialization, and I very much needed to stick to my primary scholarly agenda in New Testament and Christian Origins.

But the title of the manuscript was my undoing—*Old Ship of Zion: The Afro-Baptist Ritual in the African Diaspora*. “Old Ship of Zion”? “Afro-Baptist”? “Ritual”? The “Old Ship of Zion” metaphor immediately struck a chord; it reminded me of the old song that was a favorite of my grandparents in their worship experiences (“prayer band”) at home and in church. During visits, my sisters and I were often allowed on the sidelines at such events. We were awe-struck observers, picking up on the rhythms, the harmonies and idiosyncracies of the worshippers. “Old Ship of Zion” was one of the haunting songs I recall from those days. It is associated with so powerful and vivid a memory that after reading only a few pages of Pitts's manuscript I could not restrain myself from humming the tune, the tune that I recognized as part of the devotional period of my grandparents' Afro-Baptist folk church and house worship experiences. So I knew I had to know more about the manuscript. Once it was atop my desk I could not put it aside. It was, after all, in some sense about me and the sacred world to which I was introduced in my youth.

Actually, there are several reasons why many—sociologists, anthropologists, Americanists, Africanists, scholars of religion, theologians, literary and cultural critics—should read this book. As a historian of religion with special interests in how religions both ancient (especially Christianity) and modern (especially African-American) developed (in Geertzian terms) their ethos and world views, my interests represent something of a bridge between social-scientific studies of religion and culture and more traditional historical and literary studies. Given this position, I can assert that there are wide-ranging and provocative implications in the arguments of the book for what is likely to be the wide categories of readers with different interests and agendas. There are, for example, enormous implications for the general critical study of culture, and of religion as a vital dimension of it; for the study of African-American religious traditions and culture as well as those of other African diaspora; and for the study of American religious traditions and culture.

This book is an example of a type of social-scientific and phenomenological study of a culture that assumes religion to play a major role in the shaping of ethos and world view. In addition, it is an excellent model of a type of new scholarship that ignores entrenched disciplinary and field boundaries, prerogatives, and prejudices. In order to do full justice to the subject matter—religion—Pitts had to employ a range of different questions and angles, raise a number of different issues that go beyond any one field or discipline, and thereby risk vulnerability to the usual criticism from the “experts” and disciplinary purists.

But what seems to make the book so interesting is the author’s evident enjoyment of and relish for raising and pursuing questions and issues, whatever their traditional homes—theology, sociology, comparative religions, African studies, sociolinguistics, to name a few—that help him to understand and explain the complexity, texture, and rhythms of the world of an African-American community in central Texas. Although Pitts did not declare himself a card-carrying member, his scholarship certainly has affinities with the tendencies of the loosely defined movements associated with the “New Historicism,” in which, among other things, focus is placed upon describing culture (“thick description”) as event or action serving as a springboard for a wide-ranging analysis of society and culture (H. A. Veesser, ed., *The New Historicism*). In this view, anthropology is understood as cultural critique in

which ethnography is seen not as an end in itself, but as a foundation for theoretical play and experimentation and as an opportunity for critique of the assumptions of our larger culture (G. E. Marcus and M. M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*).

By focusing upon ritual as an important index of ethos and world view, Pitts seemed to share some of the assumptions of these movements. There is certainly evidence—for example, in the attention given to relating the ritual of Afro-Baptists to larger currents in American religious history, and to African and African diaspora communities—of Pitts's genuine interest in exploring further the larger issues and questions toward which ritual frames point. So I see the book as one good piece of evidence for the revitalization of the critical function of ethnography, as well as its growth beyond focus on the static "ethnographic present" (E. Ohnuki-Tierney, ed., *Culture Through Time*).

As applied to African-American communities, not nearly enough of the type of work that this book represents—emphasis on ritual and structure, and on "little communities"—has been done. (Nearly all the exceptions are graciously acknowledged and expanded upon by the author.) Much general academic scholarship on African-Americans has been and remains focused upon the history, literature, and criticism of great figures, institutions, and movements. In scholarship on religion and theology in particular, it is still the case that emphasis is placed primarily upon great founding figures, denominational movements, and congregations, and upon the systematization and criticism of the thinking, rhetoric, and actions of the great figures. (Martin Luther King, Jr., immediately comes to mind as one figure who in death has not lacked attention or support.) Its sophisticated sociological analysis notwithstanding, even the C. E. Lincoln/L. Mamiya book, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, billed as the "largest nongovernmental survey of urban and rural churches ever undertaken," falls back upon the artificial construct of denomination for its organizing framework and concluding arguments about the "black church."

Although focus upon gathering "qualitative data" from the African-American religious experience is not new, the sustained attention to ritual (not in general, but within a particular community) and to its implications for African-American self-understandings is not common. Moreover, in its rather consistent and fair-minded attention to the matter of origins and functions, the book models an approach to the study not

only of religion in general but of African-American religious self-understandings that has enormous potential. In the spirit of the historian of religion Charles Long, for Pitts it is neither their theology, their philosophy, nor their ethics, but rather their rhythms that reflect most accurately and dramatically the "world" of a large segment of African-Americans.

Those rhythms, Pitts came to understand, were learned and preserved not in the large and prestigious institutions, but in the little institutions and communities—of the "folk"—in which accommodation to the styles, rhythms and rhetorics of the larger world was not considered important. Such communities deserve much more attention than they have received. But such attention, Pitts argues, should be characterized by respect and sensitivity, judicious gathering and weighing of data, and empathy, not by impressionistic explanations, uncritical defensive jargon, or idealization and stereotyping by African-Americans themselves or by Hollywood.

It seemed terribly important to Pitts to attempt to present something of the complexity—the richness of the aesthetics, the poignancy, profundity, and inconsistencies of world view—reflected in the ritual frames of the Afro-Baptists he studied. Perhaps, "studied" is too weak a word to describe what Pitts did; he actually became a part of the communities that were the object of his study. Over a period of several years, he came to know individuals and their personalities, and the impact of the structural frames of the worship experience on them. He became a part of the worship experience that he describes and analyzes. Little or no concern about the needed detachment of the scientist is registered. Are there implications here for the scientific study of religion?

I suspect many readers will agree with me that this book provides a picture of a significant segment of African-American culture that is more provocative and at the same time more realistic than any book in recent years. In my opinion, few scholarly treatments about African-American religious experiences appear to reflect the sensibilities of the many, of the "folk." Many of us will recognize the personalities, the rhetoric, the communal rituals described in the book. All of us will greatly appreciate the author's empathetic and critical analysis. Might there be implications for the study of American and African-American religious traditions? Might there be in the book something of a challenge to shift perspective or focus?

The major thesis of the book is that, in Afro-Baptist worship, there are two ritual frames ("Devotion" and "Service") that correspond to some African initiation rites, and that these two contrasting frames, as retained in Afro-Baptist worship experience, function, as in some African contexts, to transport worshippers psychically from a hostile and precarious world to a smaller and more secure one that will equip them to face that hostile environment again. Pitts argues this thesis persuasively, with help from Victor Turner and by virtue of his own full initiation into the mysteries of the Afro-Baptist world. There is in the analysis of the function of the ritual much that can inform discussions about whether and in what ways African-American religions represent resistance or critique. Too much such discussion has been based upon the presence or absence of political rhetoric and direct confrontation of institutional powers. Pitts's book reminds us of the power—psychic, social and political—of the experience of *communitas* and of ritual as a part of it. Insofar as the ritual frames isolated by Pitts "transform" the emotions and psyches of participants, and insofar as such transformation sustains the alternative social formation that is the Afro-Baptist world, resistance is evident and powerful.

Nowhere is the power of the resistance clearer than in the metaphor of the ship of transport for the initiation ritual and its effects. Each participant in the ritual is transported from one world (of emotional and psychic challenges) to another world (of emotional refreshment). The folk communities of Afro-Baptists can, therefore, be understood to practice the "arts of resistance" that constitute their ritual; as alternative communities, their very existence constitutes resistance. But this means that these alternative communities must be understood in all their complexity, not as simple babble and farce. Pitts's book goes a long way toward helping us understand that they are very complex indeed.

At any rate, this book's revelation of the complexity of the folk communities among Afro-Baptists presents implications for the understanding of religion in America. To the extent that academics and journalists often categorize American religion as liberal, mainline, fundamentalist, and so forth, according to perceptions about orientations to the centers of socio-economic-political powers, they need to reconsider. If Pitts's arguments are taken seriously, the challenge is to rethink what the accommodationist response really is, and who the dissenters are.

Because the book contains so many implications for so many considerations and types of readers, it is in its own right a fascinating, powerful "ship" of intellectual and conceptual transformation. For this and many other reasons, in the words of the song that supplies the book's title, it is well worth readers' time and effort to "get on board."

VINCENT L. WIMBUSH

*Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins
Union Theological Seminary
New York City*