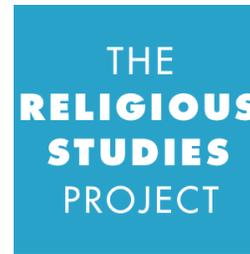


## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 21 June 2017



# Black Religious Movements and Religio-Racial Identities during the Great Migration

Podcast with **Judith Weisenfeld** (26 June 2017).

Interviewed by **Brad Stoddard**

Transcribed by [Helen Bradstock](#).

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/black-religious-movements-and-religio-racial-identities-during-the-great-migration/>

**Brad Stoddard (BS):** *Hello, this is [Brad Stoddard](#) for the Religious Studies Project. Today I have the pleasure of talking with [Judith Weisenfeld](#), who is the Agate Brown and George L. Collord Professor of Religion at Princeton. And she joins me today to talk about her new book, [New World a-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration](#). Welcome to the Religious Studies Project.*

**Judith Weisenfeld (JW):** Thanks, Brad.

**BS:** *You write in this book that, “This book is the study of the theologies, practices, community, formations and politics of early 20<sup>th</sup> century black religious movements, that fostered novel understandings of the history and racial identity of people conventionally categorised as negro in American society.” Which specific groups do you address, and which story do they collectively tell?*

**JW:** The book is a comparative study of the [Moorish Science Temple](#), the [Nation of Islam](#), Father Divine's [Peace Mission Movement](#) and a number of congregations of [Black Hebrews](#). And I pursue this comparative study in order to think about the ways in which they each engage with questions of racial identity through a religious frame. They all emerged at the same time in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, founded by migrants from the south to northern cities, or immigrants from the Caribbean to these same northern cities. And I was interested in, again, the ways in which they were all thinking about black

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racial identity history and doing so in ways that insisted that religion was to be part of these discussions. And so, taken together, we get a sense of a really vibrant conversation going on in black American life, in these groups and beyond these groups, about race and peoplehood – who we are. And I think one of the ways in which people have conventionally approached race and racial identity is to understand race as reality – race exists: people are of this race, that race, another race. With the rise of Critical Race Studies and thinking about race as a social construction, scholars have begun to talk more about race – not as a biological fact, but as socially produced. And in that kind of discussion, which informs much of my work, people who are not white are often presented as the objects of racial construction. So race is a social construction that produces hierarchy. It provides tools for controlling, otherising and so on. And so, people who are so racialised rarely appear as agents in discussion about race. And in looking at these groups together it became clear to me that, again, in these groups and in broader black public culture, people were asking these questions about who we are, racially. And these groups presented a really profound challenge to the conventional category of negro and the ways in which Christianity had become the kind-of assumed “appropriate” religion. And so, taking them together, we see black religious subjects talking about race, producing race, rejecting, changing and so on.

**BS:** *Most of these groups, not all of them, emerged or were founded or created within a relatively short time period. What is significant about this time period in American history and why was it so ripe for the production of so many diverse religio-racial identities?*

**JW:** These groups all come out of the period of the Great Migration, which begins around World War I: the movement of rural southern African-Americans, to urban contexts – the Urban South. And also the largest element of that was a northward migration. And so northern cities see huge increases in the black population over those decades, through . . . and there a various waves of it. I focus from the early ‘20s to the late ‘40s. (5:00) And so, people are moving to cities and on the East Coast in particular, in New York and Newark and Philadelphia, they are also interacting with immigrants from the Caribbean – mostly from the British West Indies but also from Danish, French and so on. And these urban contexts become a laboratory for the production of all sorts of new cultural movements. So we get the [Harlem Renaissance](#) and the cultural productions of Chicago, where black films, for example, get produced and exhibited; music and literary productions. And religious transformation is also one of the components of the social changes and the cultural changes of the Great Migration. And while these

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groups remain in the minority, it's in these urban laboratories . . . . And there are political changes as well: we see the rising of Socialists and Communists. And [Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association](#) is based in Harlem, and it is also a kind of engine for thinking about black peoplehood in new ways. And so, these are people who are moving. They're born – the members who join, and also the founders – they're born at the end of Reconstruction, some of them at the beginning. They're born as Jim Crow segregation really locks down life in the South. And then they're part of this Great Migration. And I think one of the things that they're struggling with is, “We're no longer slaves,” and there was the potential of reconstruction, “but things are not . . . things are different, but things are not different in important ways”. And so [there's] a kind of questioning of this hopeful trajectory of the Exodus, for example – questioning the degree to which black churches can be agents of liberation. And what's really so powerful in these groups – for me I found really interesting – is just questioning the very terms of identity, who we are: is this who we are? “If this is who we are”, a lot of them say, “I don't necessarily want that”. There's a story of a man, who's named only as Horace X, and he encounters the Nation of Islam, in Chicago, in the '40s. And he had tried out, he had grown up in the Church, he had tried out different . . . all sorts of different groups: political groups that had promised migration to Africa, and other kinds of religious groups that he's joined – the Freemasons. And in the story he tells to a Sociologist, he heard someone preaching on the street: “This is not who you are. They told you you were a negro; they told you you were a Christian. That's not true: I have the truth.” And he said, “I was ashamed to have been born a negro before this, and when I heard that, everything changed for me.” And it's that kind-of rethinking of identity that I found so compelling and wanted to know more about. And I think it's precisely the convergence of all of these things in the urban context that makes that possible.

**BS:** *When you were describing Horace X it reminded me of what scholars refer to as the “seeker mentality”, but it's alive and well, in different communities, much earlier – as you're describing it.*

**JW:** Yes, I found a number of cases like that in all of the groups, where people said, “I tried this, I tried that.” Sometimes they're doing multiple things at the same time. And, when I started the research, I was revisiting some of the secondary literature and things I had read many times before, but hadn't thought about it in relation to writing about these groups. And I looked back at a document by [Miles Mark Fisher](#), who was an African-American minister and also a University of Chicago PhD after he wrote this. He wrote a piece called “Organised Religions and the Cults”, and he was advocating for the

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inclusion of some of these newer movements in the US census of religious bodies that was coming up in 1935, I think it would have been. And he was making the case that these are not numerically powerful groups, but that they spoke about something that was going on in African-American life. And in order to understand religion in American life, the Census Bureau should survey them. **(10:00)** And he also told a story. He said, “It's very hard to tell . . . to draw a line between churches and the cults”, as he called them. And he told the story of his Sunday School teacher, who had also been a member of what he characterised as a cult. And he did that and was also a Sunday School teacher, and was buried out of the church. And so, returning to that piece sparked for me this sense that, as he made clear, the line is not that sharp between them; that people are moving sequentially through these or trying them out at the same time. And the other thing that became really important for me was to think about members of these groups, and the kinds of conversations they are engaged in, as part of a broader set of conversations in the black life at the time. So, not to marginalise them as strange people who put on fezzes and rejected all sorts of things to move off on their own – they were boundaried in lots of ways. But the kinds of questions they were asking were not strange, for that period. They were, actually, very much a part of what I call the kind-of public culture of race in black America.

**BS:** *Scholars have discussed all of these groups before. In your book you bring, of course, your unique analytical lens to it, but you also bring new sources and new groups of people. So can you speak – and when I think of new people, you focus a lot on Caribbean people and their impact on these movements – also can you speak to your sources, and the groups of people who are included in your narrative?*

**JW:** Sure. One of the . . . . As you said, scholars have written about these groups, the Moorish Science Temple and its' founder [Noble Drew Ali](#), the Nation of Islam and [W D Fard](#) and [Elijah Mohammad](#), [Father Divine](#) and also scholarship on black or Ethiopian Hebrews. And all that . . . . Those are texts that consider these groups individually, and focus primarily on the leaders and the theologies that they promoted. And I was interested in what it would mean to put them together in one study and think about, as I've said, the way they talk about race – reimagine race in a religious frame. And I ended up calling that ‘religio-racial identity’ because, for them, as all the founders preached, religion and race are inextricably linked. And once you understand your religious identity – be it as an Asiatic Muslim, as the Nation of Islam and Moorish Science Temple would talk about it; or an Ethiopian Hebrew; or for Father Divine's movement, raceless – once you know that, you know what your religion is supposed to be as well. So Islam, for the Nation of Islam, was created for the Asiatic; you can't

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separate those things. And I felt, in reading some of the secondary literature, that people were . . . scholars were really interested in how to talk about the religious transformations that these groups represented, but didn't really take seriously these claims of Asiatic or Ethiopian identity. And I wanted to know (I see them – in reading the primary sources – for these people, inextricably linked ) and I wanted to know how – if you are Horace X and you hear a minister of the Nation of Islam preaching, “You are not a negro Christian, you are an Asiatic Muslim” – how did Horace X go about being that thing that he came to believe he really was? And so finding what the average members did was really a challenge. (15:00) And this is, I think, why most of the texts really focus on the theologies of the leaders. And so, I ended up benefitting from some recent archival sources. Emory, for example, has a Father Divine collection that has a huge number of letters to and from Father Divine that give the texture of life in the movement – though those are not unconventional. But I ended up using vital records: the census and government documents like draft cards that are, many of them, available at [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com). And reading those kinds of documents – I just kind of stumbled on them as a way into this – showed me how profoundly important it was to members of these groups that they be represented in public, in official documents, with the religio-racial identity they had claimed and, in some cases, the names they had chosen to reflect their true identities. And so we see, in the draft cards of these men going in, there's a pre-printed category or column of racial categories listed. And it's white, negro, Asian Filipino, Indian – it says Oriental on the 1942 form. And these men say, “None of those categories fit me.” And so you have to write Moorish American. And they were successful in doing that. And those kinds of documents were, again, a completely unexpected way of finding names of average members, but also an unexpected source for finding out ways to kind-of calibrate the stakes and their investment in it. So, if you're potentially being drafted into the military, and you're struggling over how you're represented racially on this form, it means a lot to you. And I see it on the census and things like that. I learned all kinds of things from the census about residential patterns of these groups. So I spent a lot of time on ancestry.com!

**BS:** *(Laughs) Excellent.*

**JW:** On the topic of both new sources and new social actors, I was interested in the role of immigration from the West Indies from the Caribbean in this story. Because they are there. It is Marcus Garvey's . . . . He was a Jamaican immigrant who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and proposed a sense of global black identity. He did embrace the label negro, but he

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really generated a sense of black pride, a connection to Africa, investment in collective political engagement in a ways that was new for the period, and in a lot . . . He was from Jamaica and a lot of the people in the movement, when it was headquartered in Harlem, were from the Caribbean. And this gets erased a lot – very often, I think, in African-American history – that these were people who come from a very different social and political context, in many ways, to the US – and religious context as well. There are commonalities, but they have cultural differences and they're negotiating them. And these movements emerge, in part, out of those cultural negotiations across communities. But it also turns out that most of the Ethiopian Hebrews are Caribbean immigrants, the vast majority of people in the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam are African-Americans, and Father Divine's movement has a mix. And so this project was interesting, to me, to think about, again, black racial identity across not just African-American, but thinking about how these groups were in conversation with one another. I didn't do as much as I had hoped to attend to the cultural specificity of West Indian immigrants in the story, so I hope somebody else will pick that up.

**BS:** *As I read your book, you're suggesting that membership in one of these groups required the person to undergo a rather thorough process of reimagining. And I have a couple of questions about that reimagining. How did membership of one of these groups – and I know it varied from group to group – but what were some of the major ways that it involved them reimagining their sense of self and even their bodies? (20:00)*

**JW:** That was one of the ways I tried to answer the question of: if yesterday you thought you were a negro Christian and today you have been persuaded that you are a raceless child of Father Divine, or Ethiopian Hebrew – how do you do that? And so I looked at these practices of self-fashioning that are different, as you said, in each of the groups. But I did find some patterns in that, for many of them, changing their names was important and, in the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, rejecting the name, the . . . Well, in the Nation of Islam, rejecting the slave name and reclaiming (what they talked about as) a kind of “tribal” name or “true” name – for both the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam – was an important step of kind-of separating from old self and moving into the new self. And in Father Divine's Peace Mission they rejected their (what they talked of as) “mortal names” and took spiritual names that reflected their new status. So these processes of separation from the former identity and taking on a new one that reflects your true history, as they talked about it, was important. Some of the groups took on forms of dress that also spoke about that

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history, that lineage. The Moorish Science Temple were the most notable one with adopting Moorish dress: the fez for men and turbans for women. And, again, the draft cards were really interesting sources for me for thinking about the meaning of that, and the ways in which men who were registering for the draft thought of that fez as, actually, part of their bodies. And it was Nobel Drew Ali who enjoined them to wear the fez at all times. But when you see on the draft cards that they list that as a physical characteristic, by which they can be identified . . . You know it's: they have a scar, or a missing digit, or something like that. It revealed, again, how much they saw as kind-of reimagining their body, in a profound way, into this being that could be recognised as its true self, now. Names, dress, some of the group reimagined skin colour, adopted different kind of terminology for talking about the surface of the body. Moorish Science Temple, again, used the term "olive". They talked about themselves as olive-skinned Moors. And it didn't matter that there might not be a correspondence between what the beholder might think they looked like, but it was a theological way of talking about skin colour as connected to Allah and scripture, and the catechism explained that. And then practices of diet, again, they kind of separate you from your old self and you take on a true diet that remakes you and keeps you healthy. All of these groups actually had a deep investment in longevity, and thought that – in different ways – the poison diet – the wrong diet of enslavement and negro-ness and Christianity, to a certain extent, had debilitated black people as individuals and black people as a whole. So they developed certain dietary practices: either feasting or fasting, in different cases; certain foods; and also they all had investments in healing, sometimes through medicine, sometimes through diet. And they all, actually, believed that black people could live for a very, very long time, if not – in Father Divine's group – for ever, and that enslavement in the Americas had made that impossible, but they were being restored to that possibility.

**BS:** *Part of that reimagining also involved them reimagining their sense, not only geographically, but also historically. It seems that the dominant narrative at this time, in African-American communities, was to understand their position in history relative to slavery. And these new religious movements in this period provided a whole new understanding of history. Can you speak to that? (25:00)*

**JW:** That was one of, I think, the great appeals of these movements. And collectively they do the same kind of work. And in some ways saying, “You are not a negro” is saying the same thing: “Your history did not begin with slavery.” The negro is, all of them would argue, a racial category that was produced only in America – or through slavery in the Americas – and that it was a containing trap to

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imagine yourself that way, and that God didn't make you that way. So then one has to say, "Well, who are we?" Right? "What is our history?" And so they all insist that, in one way or another, black history began before slavery – which of course we know – and fill that in. And so in some cases they're arguing that . . . So, the Moorish Science Temple says: we are actually the descendents of . . . we are Moroccan, born in America. And then [it] also uses the Bible to trace back even further, so that there is a Biblical connection. But the Moorish Science Temple wants to orient people to the geographic space of Morocco, and use that as a way of talking about the beginning of history. Ethiopian Hebrew congregations again use the Bible to talk about Biblical history as African history and African history as Biblical history. They are interested in Ethiopia but there are also other geographic locations in Africa they they're interested in. And for Father Divine's Peace Mission and the Nation of Islam, it's less a geographic connection – although the Nation of Islam is very interested in Mecca. And for the Peace Mission, Father Divine's kingdom on earth is where . . . he is there and he's created this Utopia. But their approach to rejecting the history of negroes and enslavement involved not geography, but time – is how I came to think about it. So the Nation of Islam, there's a lot of . . . In African-American Christians, and also in the Ethiopian Hebrew groups and the Moorish Science Temple, there's a lot of engagement with the Bible, and looking for where we are, and how to fit our history there. And the Nation of Islam says: " Lets just throw that away. Because even from the beginning of time, from the moment of creation, *that's* where we are. We have to get rid of . . . The Bible tells us the whole story wrong." And Father Divine – time approaches to say: "Race is a product of the devil, I've returned to usher in a new heaven and new earth. Heaven is not some far-off thing; it's here now. And so we start from now. You can enter my kingdom if you do all of these things. And you're not a negro, that's from the past. And being a negro is why you die. And if you reject all of that you can live with me for ever." So the Nation of Islam projected back to the moment of creation and Father Divine projected forward into an eternal future. There's a great . . . He would send out this Christmas and New year's card, in the late '40s, that had his image and Mother Divine, his wife, and it said : "One eternal Merry Christmas, one eternal Happy New Year!"

**BS:** *Very good! Thank you. Well, I'd like to say that this is a phenomenal book. And I can imagine it finding a home in quite a few Religious Studies courses, actually. So, best of luck with the book, and thank you so much for your time and your insights. I appreciate it.*

**JW:** Thank you.

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