Through all phases of its history, religion—as worship, context, idea, trope, symbol, influence, value, and inspiration—has abounded in African American literature. Since the first Africans arrived on the shores of the New World, the imaginative impulse to envision and create has shaped the development of African American religious life; and the expression of religious doctrines and creeds has provided source material, formal techniques, symbolic language, and thematic orientation for African American literature. The relationship between religion and literature began in anonymity, with the “unknown bards” of the spirituals who had to “steal away to Jesus.” And it continues in the highly public and idiosyncratic personalities of hip-hop poets who know that “Jesus walks” with them. Examples are more easily identified and the religious idiom more traditional up to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, when artists and intellectuals explored in new ways the historical experiences of black America and contemporary experiences of black life. Although religious elements become more diffuse and diverse, they were present nonetheless.

**Religious Imagination**

In *Beloved* (1987), a novel steeped in biblical and folk religious traditions, Toni Morrison sets forth the unique relationship between religion and literature in African American culture when the character Baby Suggs intones that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine.” The exercise of imagination has been vital to the articulation of religious faith in African American culture. Likewise, religious experience and observance have influenced all forms of African American literary production. Telling stories, whether oral or written, was never seen as an exclusive or proprietary talent reserved for an elite class but as an indispensable skill for all to apply in identity formation and culture building.

Both African American religion and literature have reflected how things are and illuminated how they could be. The religious dimensions of African American cultural output are usually interpreted in one of two ways: from the point of view of a religious doctrine or practice to which one applies a literary methodology or by beginning with a literary text of any genre to which one applies a methodology derived from religious studies. In both cases religion and literature have reflected cultural patterns that highlighted tensions, affirmed traditions, and innovated strategies through which African Americans survived and endured and also thrived and created.

The “double consciousness,” articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as a defining characteristic of African American identity also aptly illustrates the relationship between religion and literature in African American culture: a sustained tension of existential orientations that leads to an ongoing conversation about black life in both the creative and spiritual realms of existence. Indeed, Du Bois’s cultural analysis exhibits in its literary expression a sustained indexing of black culture to black religion. Articulating the ambition to merge the double self into a “truer and better self,” Du Bois names the effort a “spiritual striving,” and references such an arrival as occurring in the “kingdom of culture,” an obvious allusion to Christian scripture. *The Souls of Black Folk* even concludes with a prayer, an invocation to “O God the Reader,” that there will be an “awakening”—a classic Christian
allusion to conversion—on the part of individuals and culture where African Americans will be “judged by souls, not skin,” a sentiment echoed some sixty years later by Martin Luther King Jr.

Christianity

Christian practices and beliefs have provided the dominant paradigm for the relationship between African American religion and literature but their influence is paradoxical. Christianity has played a tremendous role in the lives and artistic production of African Americans while the perversions of Christianity—first evident in slavery and ongoing in racism—have been indelibly stamped on the consciousness of African American writers. The literature, therefore, contains evidence of the uplifting and transformative power of religion in the lives of its characters, as in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) when Harriet Jacobs expresses her gratitude upon receiving her freedom: “God raised me up a friend among strangers. Friend, the word is sacred.” The literature also contains evidence of religion’s absence and failure in their lives. Representative of the betrayal of religious hope are lines found in Countee Cullen’s poem “Gods” (1925), which, in addition to disappointment in Christianity, expresses nostalgia for African spirituality: “God’s alabaster turrets gleam / Too high for me to win / Unless He turns His face and lets / Me bring my own gods in.”

The Bible

From slave narratives to fiction, from spirituals to rap songs, from political manifestos to sermons, meaning has been expressed scripturally. In the hands of black exegetes, be they theologians, writers, or the folk, the Bible (Hebrew and Christian) has served a variety of functions, primarily as a key to interpreting meaning. The Bible is responsible for inspiring and informing literary expression but also for presenting problems for those steeped in proclamation and interpretation. As set forth in the Gospel of John, the Bible functions in African American culture as *word*—embodied divinity—animated by the engagement of literary and religious forms. In literary texts and oral traditions of storytelling, as ancient history and as present reality, African American writers have often answered questions about the present by citing biblical examples and images. The way the spiritual “Go Down, Moses” adapts the Exodus story for relevance to slavery is one compelling example. Likewise, African American theologians, particularly in the formation of liberation theologies in the 1970s, turned to literary sources to illustrate the tenets of those theological investigations and practices, as did Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993).

An ability to read the Bible for themselves and thereby “keep the white folks from meddling” in their interpretation of scriptures was the motivation cited in many slave and spiritual narratives for acquiring the skills of literacy. For example, in her visionary writings collected as *Gifts of Power* (1830–1864), Shaker minister Rebecca Jackson credits a divine miracle for her acquisition of the ability to read. Yet from the first encounters with the Bible, African Americans have recognized the ways in which biblical principles and narratives have been manipulated to serve two contradictory functions: to sustain systemic racism but also to promote liberating activity. Henry Highland Garnet’s “Address to the Slaves of the United States” (1865) or Maria Stewart’s “Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall” (1833),
among other abolitionist texts, represent a dominant theme in early black writing, neatly summarized by Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) when he proclaims that between “the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ there is the widest possible difference.” Sometimes the perversion of Christianity is attributed to southern slaveholders and complacent northern whites, but African American authors also challenged their own people for their passivity in ignoring their claim to full humanity as set forth in scripture, as in Galatians 4:7—“So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (NRSV).

**Biblical Tropes**

African American literary and religious traditions have borrowed freely from each other; as a result they share characteristics that convey both textual and spiritual principles. Several tropes associated with biblical hermeneutics can be applied to African American literature. Among them is conjuring, the summoning of spirits by invocation or incantation, which has long been associated with folk spiritual practices in southern black communities. Since Zora Neale Hurston’s portrayal of the protagonist in *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), conjuring has been linked to divine power as revealed in the Bible. Hurston depicts Moses as a Hoodoo medicine man who possesses “power-compelling words” derived from the Bible, “the greatest conjure book of all.” The theologian Theophus Smith, in *Conjuring Culture* (1994), argues that conjure is imaginative power exercised to transform the condition of black lives and that the Bible is central to this activity.

Furthermore, the ways in which African American writers, such as Hurston, freely adapted the most sacred text of Western culture, illustrates a foundational aesthetic characteristic of African American culture. The technique of sampling, or borrowing, from the Bible derives from the ways in which African Americans approached the sacred text as a magical formulary or ritual prescription for reenvisioning and transforming history and culture. This eclectic application of the Bible was practiced first by the authors of the spirituals but was cast in comic tones by folklorists who established an aesthetic form and a theological hermeneutic for future collaborations between literature and religion.

Conjure, in other words, is both a theological and an aesthetic metaphor for cultural and ideological transformation. Derived from the synchronization of retained African and acquired Christian practices, conjure—as an act and as a trope—empowers African Americans denied customary access to forms of power and invigorates sympathetic magic with the power to make things happen. As Hurston saw Hoodoo practiced in New Orleans, it was an intrinsic part of African American religion because it offered a means by which blacks could exert control over their interior lives. As a result, at the root of conjure is the African principle that does not distinguish between the sacred and the profane, thereby establishing from their origins a natural reciprocity between religion and literature in African American cultural production.

Speaking in tongues is a biblical image derived from the event of Pentecost, when Christ sent
the Holy Spirit to humanity, eliciting a cacophony of languages being uttered as evidence of spirit possession. As a literary device and theological principle, speaking in tongues refers to the intricate interplay of self and other, known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar speech that characterizes African American writing. A form of double discourse, speaking in tongues is a spiritual, aesthetic, and practical expression. It engages language or words only known to the divine and the faithful; it adapts history and present reality to convey the language of possibility; and it empowers the speaker and hearers who understand the coded dialogue while simultaneously protecting them from the intrusion of the dominant culture.

Speaking in tongues aptly sets forth the complexity and diversity of African American religious and imaginative lives. Speaking in tongues as *heteroglossia* (languages that speak to a wider world and common culture) affirms the common and universal principles of equality, liberation, and justice so prominent in black literature and theology. Speaking in languages known only to God (*glossolalia*) sustains the secret and ecstatic experience of blacks that requires interpretation for others outside the experience. Furthermore, glossolalia gives evidence of what is different and diverse in American culture, both the generative distinctions that promote multicultural independence and the destructive distinctions that separate and exclude one from full engagement with a pluralistic society. All these distinctions are endowed with divine authority when the trope of speaking in tongues is applied.

One of many examples of the principle of speaking in tongues can be seen in spirituals that were designed to communicate on more than one level. Songs such as "Steal Away" may have served as a means to convene secret resistance meetings, while "Deep River, My Home Is over Jordan" may imply a wish to cross over to Africa or the North. Included as a form of speaking in tongues is *signifying*, articulated by the theologian Charles Long in *Significations* (1986) as the most widely accepted interpretation of the religious practice of indirect verbal play. Henry Louis Gates's adaptation of the trope of the *talking book* in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), which examines the ancient poetry and myths found in African and Pan-American culture, represents an influential approach to speaking in tongues as a form of intertextual transmission and revision of various biblical and African-derived spiritual beliefs.

The jeremiad, or prophetic denunciation of present conduct and the forewarning of eventual trouble, characterizes much of biblical history set forth in the Hebrew Bible, where, along with other prophets, Jeremiah predicts the coming downfall of the Kingdom of Judah because its rulers have broken the covenant with the Lord. Prophecy highlighting the relationship between humanity and divinity is later iterated by the gospel writer's portrayal of Jesus as Christ. The books of the prophets and the words of Jesus serve as models for literary works in which the author bitterly laments the state of society and its morals in a serious tone of sustained invective with a corresponding prophecy of society's imminent downfall.

Although not limited to African American literary production, the form of a jeremiad and the power of its biblical precedent endowed such liberation struggles as abolitionism and the civil rights movement with a divine sanction. As with other biblically derived tropes, the spirituals record the first jeremiads when they ask, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" In prose David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, and Very Expressly, to*
Those of the United States (1848) reminds people that “God rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, having his ears continually open to the cries, tears, and groans of his oppressed people.” Later the Pan-African writings of Marcus Garvey, as in his “Appeal to the Conscience of the Black Race to See Itself” (1923), urged a return to Africa because “the evil of internal division is wrecking our existence as a people, and if we do not seriously and quickly move in the direction of a readjustment it simply means that our doom becomes imminently conclusive.” The jeremiad is memorably extended by James Baldwin in essays collected in The Fire Next Time (1963) that constitute a moral manifesto whose extraordinary power resides in Baldwin's evangelical eloquence about systemic racism. Further, Baldwin links the “salvation” of America and “another country” without such racism to African Americans’ ability to educate white minds and hearts into a new maturity and decency. The modern jeremiad reaches its climax, perhaps, in the speeches and sermons of Martin Luther King, as in a collection of his essays that includes “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), when he challenges even those who profess to support the civil rights movement to understand why African Americans “can’t wait.”

Slave Narratives

Spirituals and slave narratives are the two original genres of African American literary production that first engaged biblical tropes and introduced aesthetic innovation. As such, they serve as models for subsequent literary production, which can, in most cases, be traced back to the influence of one or both genres. Slave narratives and especially spirituals have transcended their particular context and now symbolically represent a direct challenge to forms of racial oppression with a corresponding universal hope of liberation from oppression, key tenets of black theology throughout the history of African American experience.

Authors of slave narratives engaged Christian discourse as personal affirmations of faith but also as a rhetorical device to persuade other Christians to enact their religious principles in service to the abolitionist cause. In some cases, as with the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, rites of passage in Christian life are linked with stages of liberation from slavery by way of the attainment of literacy. His baptism is when he is taught by his mistress the rudiments of language; conversion is when he tests and improves his knowledge by way of public engagement; his confirmation occurs after reading antislavery tracts when he realizes he no longer could be a slave; and his ordination takes effect when he accepts a public career as orator and a call to preach for human rights. Similarly the Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1850), while constructed by an amanuensis, represents Truth's rhetorical performances in public settings when she applied a strategy to combine biblical allusions with her own personal experience to convince people of the true meaning of scripture. Furthermore, like Julia Foote in A Brand Plucked from the Fire (1879) or the memoirs of other free black women such as Zilpha Elaw (1846) or Jarena Lee (1836) and other authors of spiritual and slave narratives, Sojourner Truth claims, “I talk to God and God talks to me,” to validate her arguments and claim the authority to preach.

Slave narratives also represented the first articulations of the jeremiad but often with a twist, for rather than a pessimistic conclusion, they often ended in triumph after a successful escape, as when Henry Brown boxed and shipped himself to freedom. Furthermore, they
were among the first instances of a social critique of Christianity, thereby giving permission for later challenges to the religion as practiced by the dominant culture and as it disables the aspirations of African Americans. Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), and James Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) illustrate this influence. By contrast, Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) and other neo–slave narratives resoundingly affirm the spiritual legacy of the slave narrative tradition as a liberating guide—although not without irony, as seen in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

Finally, slave narratives have served as important documents that preserve folkways derived from African religious practices, thereby affirming the intentional survival of ancestral influences. For example, Frederick Douglass describes an instance of sympathetic magic when he was instructed by an elder to carry a root for protection from an overseer. Harriet Jacobs also cites the use of charms and fetishes among slaves and records details of a Methodist shout and Johnkannaus festival, both of which provide striking similarities to spirit possession in dances and other performances of African religious rituals. In the autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), the writer provides considerable detail about his Ibo culture to demonstrate its equality with European forms of civilization, making analogies to the Bible to explain the spiritual dignity of African beliefs in ancestor reverence, a sacred cosmos, dreams, and other practices.

**Spirituals**

In 1927 James Weldon Johnson paid tribute to the “Black and Unknown Bards” who “sang a race from wood and stone to Christ”: the creators of spirituals; the form Johnson illustrates in images is the first instance of an ongoing pattern in African American literary production and spiritual development that extends, elaborates, and refines basic principles of creation and truth. Principally associated with African American church congregations of the antebellum South and the earlier, more informal, and sometimes clandestine gatherings of enslaved people, spirituals were created as a result of a process of mutual influence and reciprocal borrowing—the same spiritual and aesthetic principle applied to conjuring—from evangelical sermons and hymns, biblical stories, traditional African chants and praise songs, and the combined experiences of enslaved people in the South.

Features of the spirituals that can be found in later literary production include a demonstration of the ways in which a simple lyric can serve several functions. In the spirituals enslaved people critically analyzed their conditions, fashioned a creative theological response, indicted their oppressors without overtly denigrating them, reasserted the influence of an African sensibility, and empowered themselves by exercising a form of resistance that would endure longer than the conditions to which they were subject. The theology of spirituals was based not in doctrine but on ethics, instructing enslaved people not what to believe but how to act.

In creation as well as performance spirituals exhibited the essential characteristics of spontaneity, variety, and communal interchange. The form of the spirituals was flexible and improvisational, thereby able to fit an individual slave's experience into the consciousness of group, creating at once an intensely personal and vividly communal experience, a hallmark of
African American writing that often was expected to uplift the race, as in Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901). Call and response characterizes this dynamic relationship between the individual and the community. As practiced in spirituals, call and response embodies the foundational spiritual principle behind their performance, denoting the dual requirement of what is necessary for completion. When spirituals were sung by enslaved people, they amplified their desire for liberation and created conditions of sacred space and time in a ritual act, wherein the biblical stories of which they sang were transformed and the history of the ancient past became the history of the present.

Synthesizing sacred and secular meaning, the spirituals drew images from the Bible to interpret their own experience, measuring it against a wider system of theological and historical meaning. Later African American writing adapted biblical themes, performance techniques, and images derived from spirituals to create an ongoing theological aesthetic whereby the Bible and the spirituals became the glossolalia for informed readers. For example, Martin R. Delany's *Blake* (1859), J. Saunders Redding's *No Day of Triumph* (1942), and John O. Killen's *Youngblood* (1954) incorporate spirituals to structure their plots and advance their themes. The most revered novel in the African American canon, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), employs the spirituals and folk forms they engendered as influences on the characters, plot, and figurative language. While Toni Morrison freely adapts biblical stories and images in her fiction, in *Song of Solomon* (1978), as in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), striking moments of call and response are incorporated into the denouement of their plots. Margaret Walker's poems collected in *For My People* (1952) also engage a biblical idiom.

Along with slave narratives and spirituals, other pre–Civil War African American literary texts easily accommodate religious themes and complement authors’ diverse subjects in many rhetorical forms: addresses and speeches, orations, sermons, petitions and pamphlets, letters, confessionals, and other autobiographies. Whether the *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* of Phyllis Wheatley (1773), the letters of Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (1791), the sermons of Absalom Jones (1746–1818), or the speeches of Maria Stewart (1803–1879), all these literary pioneers pondered, explained, exhorted and demonstrated that their sisters and brothers should seek edification—intellectual, moral, spiritual, and practical—in order to improve in all spheres of human development and to uplift the race.

**Gospel and Blues**

The spirituals also shaped the development of the sacred lyrics known as gospel. Thomas A. Dorsey (1899–1993), composer of such standards as “There Will Be Peace in the Valley,” is considered by many the father of gospel music. As a young man he accompanied some of the most famous blues singers of all time, such as Bessie Smith (1894–1937). He also promoted the career of Charles A. Tindley (1851–1933), composer of “We'll Understand It Better By and By.” In his essay “Rock, Church, Rock,” poet and novelist Arna Bontemps (1902–1973) observed how traditionalists in the black church considered the blending of the sacred and the secular as “the devil's music” and initially shunned gospel music. But because the aesthetic and spiritual impulse behind the composition of gospel music was authentic and
characteristic of black creation, the form survived and continued to thrive in the works of James Cleveland (1931–1991) and others, providing further demonstration of the eclectic arrangement of language in African American literary forms.

Spirituals also had a direct influence on blues lyrics. Described by James Cone as a secular spiritual—even when Robert Johnson (1911–1938) is lamenting a “hellhound on [his] trail” or W. C. Handy (1873–1958), the father of the blues, wrote about them in “Beale Street Blues”—blues forms served a functional role. They were created and performed in a ritualistic way to affirm the essential worth of black humanity. And in the case of Johnson and his mysterious death at the crossroads, a background myth supports the religious elements. In Stomping the Blues (1976), Albert Murray makes a case for the ways in which the blues, in composition and performance, complemented existing religious forms of worship but contributed an additional element that more completely described the reality of black life. While one would still get up for church on Sunday morning and face the tedium of work on Monday, on Saturday night juke joints replaced churches and the blues substituted for hymns. It is the aspect of affirmation that connects blues theologically with spirituals: to preserve black humanity through ritual and drama and to transform—if only temporarily—existence. James Cone's The Spiritual and the Blues (1972) articulates the ways in which theological principles are iterated in secular forms of black cultural production. As he states, the blues are not about but are the essence of the black experience. As such the blues have become an idiomatic element in African American cultural production that combines art and life, the symbolic with the real, matter with spirit. The blues are an artistic response to the chaos of life that, although temporary and not directed toward salvation or an eternal reward, helps one cope and find meaning in an otherwise overwhelming set of circumstances. Furthermore, because “you've got to pay your dues to play the blues,” accompanying any invocation of the blues is a stamp of authenticity, a proclamation that what is being preached is true. Since disbelieving northerners challenged the veracity of slaves’ accounts of their experience, authenticity (or “keeping it real,” in modern parlance) has been an ongoing value in black cultural production.

Folklore

Although the institutional black church grew in visibility and influence, coincident to this development were the ways in which religious feelings and perspectives were expressed in black communities as a folk tradition. This is where the African, Christian, and other elements combined and where much of the retained religious feeling and lore resided. Following emancipation, communities dispersed and the church ceased to have such an all-encompassing function. Furthermore, African Americans could finally speak in realistic terms of their desire for more secular goals such as material success, integration, or migration north for new opportunities.

Since the beginnings of their literary production, African Americans have saved religious traditions and spiritual folkways and applied them for aesthetic pleasure. The early appearance of Africanisms notwithstanding, nontraditional forms of black religious life begin to appear in the literary canon when Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) and others introduce an appreciation of the oral tradition sustained in folklore. Hurston bears the distinction of being among the first to preserve the spiritual expressions of black life that appear in more secular
forms such as work songs and folktales. As gathered in *Mules and Men* (1928), *Tell My Horse* (1937), and *The Sanctified Church*, a collection of essays from the 1920s and 1930s, folklore and customs illustrate how religious ideas and practices endured and emerged from the experience of slavery. Principles of black folklore assigned by Hurston include the spiritual dimensions of identity formation and community building. Stories told by the folk in a signifying and competitive performance were often adaptations of biblical stories or original stories peopled with biblical figures. And because God “never finds fault with or censures the Negro,” God is portrayed in human terms that relate to their own experience, and “the apostles walked and talked like section hands.”

Additionally, the principle of applying to life and storytelling “the will to adorn,” as observed by Hurston, dignifies the creative and spiritual impulse in whatever form it takes and links the aesthetic and theological in a harmonious act of cultural production. James Weldon Johnson, who with his brother, J. Rosamond, is credited with saving and introducing to the public many of the spirituals, also wrote one of the most memorable sequences of African American poetry that illustrates the power of folkways to preserve traditions, build community, and sustain hope. *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927) elevates the African American sermon to the level of lyric poetry while at the same time, in “The Creation,” painting a picture of life's origins and the maker God as unmistakably black. A similar effect is achieved by Langston Hughes in *Tambourines to Glory* (1949).

By the creation of heroes with extraordinary and often mystical abilities but who resemble ordinary people, such as High John the Conqueror, folktales underscore the collaborative quality of creation—between artist, community, and Creator—revealed in earlier aesthetic forms that also project a sense of religion that does not crush the individual but encourages originality. Also consistent with the past, storytelling sessions were public ritual performances that alluded to biblical incidents and folktales to project moral lessons that show virtue rewarded or greed punished, consistent with conventional Christian doctrine.

While folktales exhibited the characteristics of call and response and improvisation, they were also a ritual response to reality. In one creation story related by Hurston, “How Black People Became Black,” the condition of black skin that leads to discrimination is explained by exploiting stereotypes of presumed African American laziness and greed, thereby using humor to soothe lingering hurts and to diminish facts of life that could otherwise be overwhelming. Related to the use of humor is the introduction of a trickster figure, derived from West African tales such as that of “Anansi, the Spider” and reconfigured in black folklore as the devil or, most memorably, as Brer Rabbit. As with conjure, the trickster provides an example of spiritual power that is available to people often cut off from traditional forms of power. Through wits and craft one can change one's reality or heal the indignities of life in a racist culture. Finally, as set forth in many African religious systems and aesthetic forms, where the goal of life is balance and harmony, African American folklore adopts religious doctrines that are at once realistic and hopeful: “God don't like ugly and he ain't stuck on pretty”; “God may not come when you want him but he's right on time.”

**The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement**

The way in which Hurston drew attention to the African American cultural tradition as providing a means for survival and forms of creativity also underscores how religious attitudes and values are conditioned by culture and, in turn, sustain culture. Ever evolving value systems and ethical practices that emerge from folk traditions challenged accommodationism and materialism and reinforced the self-affirming, ethnocentric qualities of black religion and spiritual identity. Hurston, however, represented more than a southern folk revival. By proximity and patronage she is linked to Harlem, the site of a great cultural movement that emerged in the 1920s. The Harlem Renaissance was the first organized attempt to initiate a cultural movement after slavery, and it is associated with some of the legendary figures of African American literature, including Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. Part of the cultural revival involved the development of new religious belief systems that performed a function similar to folklore and that both inspired and brought forth a creative output. For example, the movement led by Father Divine is cited as the source for Ras the Destroyer in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The Nation of Islam is prominent in the works of Amiri Baraka (1934–), and Sonia Sanchez (1934–), and, of course, Malcolm X, or el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (1925–1965).

The Black Arts movement of the late 1960s promoted the repudiation of European bases for aesthetics, including Judeo-Christian forms, which Larry Neal (1937–1981), a poet and leading theorist of the movement, viewed as old spirituality. African American writing and, indeed, life were in need of new spirituality specific to the black experience, which frequently sees the world from the perspective of the oppressed. Often associated with the Black Power political movement, in many respects this cultural movement was a spiritual antecedent of liberation theology, which rooted divine power in black power. Less esoteric and more mainstream was the quest for ancestors highlighted by Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), which inspired a phenomenon of recovery of the past, both spiritually and historically, on the part of individuals and families.

**Conclusion**
Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) may be the defining literary text in illustrating the unique relationship between religion and literature in African American culture. The novel is not conventionally religious in any sense, and its protagonist, Janie, is far from conventional or pious. But throughout the story of her search for love and identity, both qualities are linked to a spiritual source that goes back to the origins of African American religiosity. She awakens to spiritual possibility through an appreciation of God's creation; later that joy will be tempered with humility when she faces the dangerous aspects of natural power. But through her intimate identification with divinity through nature, or her beloved Tea Cake, whom she describes as having “the keys to the Kingdom,” Janie envisions a kingdom of God that in its simplicity and sincerity embodies the truth of the beatitudes: that the last shall be first, that the spiritual has more value than the material, and that what is blessed is not always found in a sanctified setting. Most important, perhaps, for a traditionally marginalized community is the sense of accountability expected by the people from their God. While God's eyes may always be on the people and God's intervention in human affairs may be possible, the people's eyes are watching God. This secular presentation of a scenario of black life affirms the sacred grounding and the African origins of cultural production by African Americans. It defines the relationship between the individual and society and delineates the differences between civic and private responsibilities. It elevates the originality of the individual but only in the context of a community of kin. And it shows how that which serves a practical function—for example, the everyday use of a quilt—can also be a source of creative delight, spiritual edification, and an occasion to affirm the sacred origins of African Americans.

If Hurston's novel serves as the creative symbol of the relationship between African American religion and literature, the work of Nathan A. Scott Jr. (1925–2006) represents the theoretical tradition of theological interpretation of the sacred literary output. More than any other African American of his generation, Scott—an ordained Episcopal priest with a PhD in literature—lived and wrote on the boundary between religion and literature: between the sacred and the secular, ancient and modern, theology and culture, and the church and the academy. He wrote eloquently about the religious dimensions of African American literature when, in 1979, he contributed the essay “Black Literature” to *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*. In it he credits African American writers with a sacred purpose, to move their “own people toward a deeper understanding of themselves.” He also encourages them, as rhetoricians, to be “agent[s] of self-discovery for the nation at large,” to assent to the belief that it is “within the power of a disciplined language to alter consciousness and thus redeem the human reality.” As a sacred act literary production that upholds the relationship between religion and literature in African American culture is both ontological and teleological: it demonstrates a way of life and a reason to live.

See also *Abolitionism and Antislavery; Baptists: African American; Folklore; Glossolalia; Invisible Institution; Methodists: African American; Music: African American Gospel; Music: African American Spirituals; Nation(s) of Islam; New Religious Movements; Black Nationalist Movements; Pentecostals: African American; Race and Racism; Religious Thought: African American; Religious Thought: Womanist; Roman Catholicism: African American Catholics; Spiritualism; Voodoo*.
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