

An Interview with Curtis J. Evans

Curtis J. Evans is Assistant Professor of the History of Christianity. He began his appointment in Autumn of 2007. In this interview Evans discusses his recent and upcoming projects and reflects on teaching in Swift Hall. A Dean's Forum will be held on Prof. Evans's book on May 13, 2009. Check our website for details.



CIRCA: Can you provide a summary of your recent book?

CE: My book, *The Burden of Black Religion*, is a critical analysis of the history of interpretations and cultural images of African American religion. Although I begin the book with debates about Christianizing slaves and what effect Christianity might have on slaves, the book's real beginning (and end) is the 1940s. I worked backward as a way of trying to answer a specific question: why were social scientists, particularly African American sociologists, in the 1940s attempting to undermine what they regarded as a persisting notion that black Americans were naturally religious? When I was researching this material, I began asking questions that any historian would: what did it mean to say that blacks were "naturally religious" [read the book to find the answer!]? Why was this topic a salient

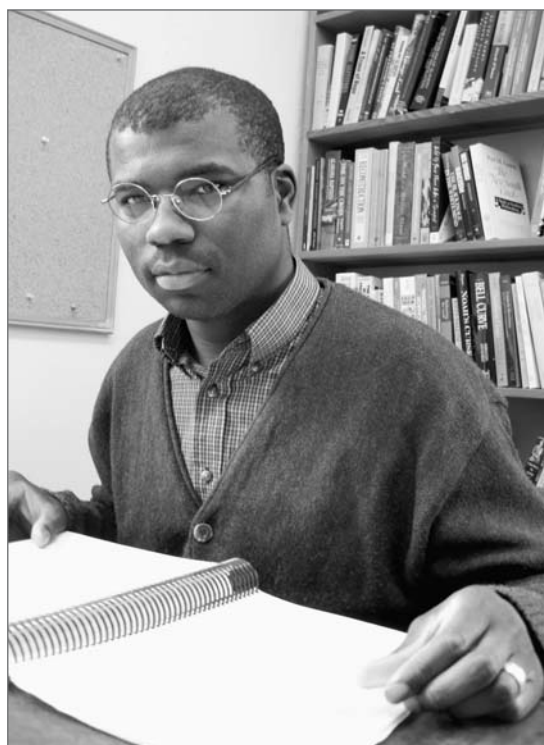
issue? What were the political and social implications of these debates?

I realize, as my early advisor David D. Hall noted, discovering the "origins" of ideas or historical antecedents of particular debates can be a much disputed and never ending process, so it may seem odd that I begin my book with Anglican missionaries in the 1740s trying to assess how Christianity would affect black slaves. What could this possibly have to do with the 1940s? I believe that I had isolated the first crucial debate about the meaning and function of religion to slaves in the American colonies that would have long-term significances about the place of blacks in the nation. Concentrated attention on slave capacities raised a host of complex questions about blacks in America and religion acquired a particular significance as slaves began converting to Christianity. Also, I tried to achieve a breadth of analysis that would not arbitrarily exclude any genre or significant arena of inquiry that related to black religion. In other words, I wanted to aim for an almost comprehensive historical reflection on how whites and blacks imagined and interpreted black religion from the years of slavery to the 1940s. I was interested in what had come before and how history was impinging on that moment of transition in the 1940s.

What I concluded was that religion was the signal quality or feature of black life that was fastened on by interpreters as a means of assessing and speaking about the place of blacks in American culture. Although slavery, segregation, and the harshness of racial oppression for blacks in the United States go a long way in explaining the way that black churches have functioned as social institutions and as spaces of identity and meaning, I also suggest in my book that "black religion" for interpreters was about more than actual churches. It was also about the "uses" of one group's religious and social experience as a way of mediating another group's (or individual's) spiritual experience. In a rather cruel irony, the religious experiences of black Americans, borne of years of suffering and oppression, were often invoked by whites as a softening element that would supply a missing dimension to an otherwise arid and spiritually desiccated culture. Not only that, but this conception of black "religion" required as its opposite capacious intellect, which had the effect of reinforcing a cultural image of blacks as contentedly super-religious and lacking in intelligence.

CIRCA: Do you have any new projects you can share with readers?

CE: I am looking at the origins of "Race Relations" Sundays, which were held annually on the second Sunday of February, beginning in 1923. RRS were founded under the auspices of the Federal Council of Churches



and part of the rationale was to demonstrate the sufficiency of Christianity in solving the race problem in the United States. I am in the early stages of this project, having done quite extensive research in the rich archives of the Presbyterian Historical Society. I will need to supplement this with research in the records of local churches and conducting interviews with persons who were involved in the National Council of Churches in the

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1950s and 1960s. I suppose that I am especially interested in RRS because they were primarily about churches wrestling with what was rightly perceived as a blot on their Christian witness. It is both tragic and inspiring when one gets a glimpse of what was going on behind the scenes as the RRS leaders return again and again to their foundational Christian precepts on Christian brotherhood and unity in the face of massive divisions on the ground because of the seemingly intractable problem of race.

CIRCA: Tell us about what you are teaching at the Divinity School.

CE: I am teaching two courses for this (Autumn 2008) semester, Christianity and Slavery in America and Religion in Modern America from the Civil War to the 1920s. It

is not always pleasant to discuss issues such as racist images of blacks or religious defenses of slavery, but I cannot imagine a better place than the classroom with highly motivated, bright, and conscientious students. The questions that they ask and the unique perspectives that they bring are some of the reasons that teaching is such a deeply rewarding experience. As we wrestle with how historians explain causation or the concrete details of attempts to Christianize slaves, I appreciate that our students recognize the nuances and complexities of history and rightly eschew one-dimensional simplistic analyses of the role of religion in modern society and history.

CIRCA: Please offer a reflection on the transition from teaching at Florida State University to teaching at the University of Chicago.

CE: The comparison is hard to make because I have not taught here long enough and I taught undergraduates and graduate students at FSU, but I am only working with graduate students this semester. So much has happened since FSU: a year's research leave, my first book, my father's death in February, and living in a much colder climate. Teaching has been one of the few sources of continuity between my time at FSU and my time here. It has eased my transition. □

“...we wrestle with how historians explain causation or the concrete details of attempts to Christianize slaves...”

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of kinship stronger and deeper than blood, hate or heartbreak.” His admiration for Lincoln conflates with Bliss's betrayal. Yet, ironically, it is the racist Sunraider, speaking on the Senate floor, who invokes the one and the many: “[H]istory has put to us three fatal questions, has written them across our sky in accents of accusation... How can the many be as one? How can the future deny the Past? And How can the light deny the dark?”

Now that the remarkable feat that many believed they would not live to see is accomplished, these questions, which invoke the mystery of American faith, should occupy our concern, and the new president's. May

we rejoice in this remarkable moment, yet not blind ourselves in tragic self-satisfaction to the challenges and complexities of what lies ahead. □

References:

Read Matt Mendlesohn in *The New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/06/opinion/06mendelsohn.html>

Read David Samuels, on Obama and *Invisible Man*, in *The New Republic*: <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=5c263e1d-d75d-4af9-aid7-5cb761500092>

Read Robert Bellah on American civil religion: http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm

