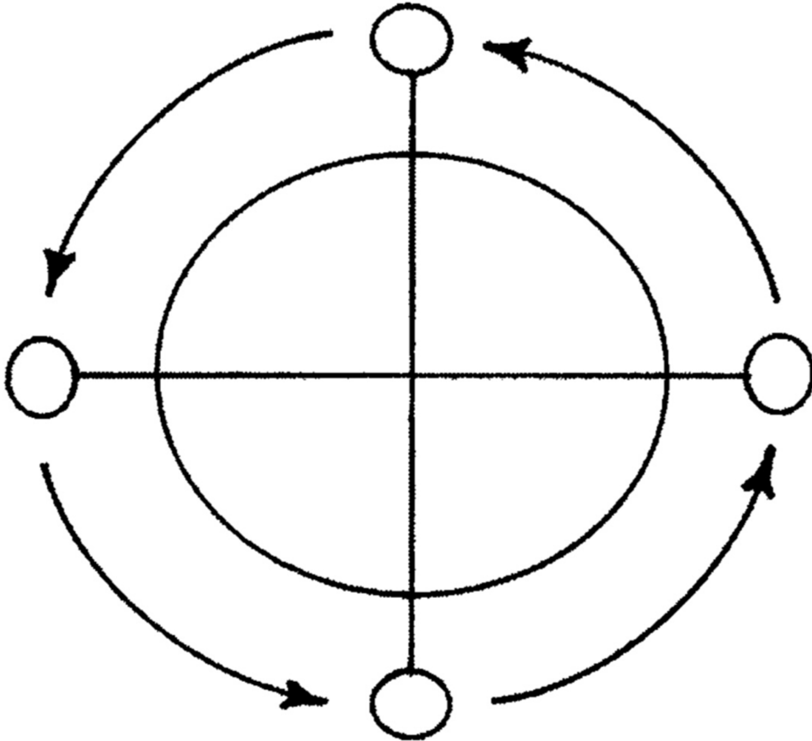
Challenges to the secular age viewed through the work of Anthony B. Pinn:

Black humanism and Christian apostasy in African American communities



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(…) every Black person should please remember,

that you were Africans before you became anything else.

Bose Ogulu

Regarding the image on the cover:

This is an interpretation of the *dikenga* or Kongo cosmogram[1].

For more information, see page 7.

[1] https://www.lawrencetalks.org/charla-de-merienda/2019/9/9/palo-mayombe-kongo-derived-afro-cuban-spirituality – Retrieved on January 25 2023.

Summary

Although we might live in a secular age, African Americans often see themselves embedded in a religious community. As a result, losing one's religion can be a lonely endeavor for some. The Black religious experience has a predominantly Christian exterior, but consists of a spectrum of theist and nontheist religious expression. This thesis applies the work of Antony B. Pinn to address the tensions between religion and secularity among apostatic African Americans. By building up a framework of our current understanding of the secular and placing the secular within the historic context of enslavement and diaspora, we have the opportunity to give new meanings to religion and secularity. We trace the foundations of the Black religious experience and Black humanism in order to understand why dilemmas continue to exist in the lives of Black apostates to this day. The experience of the enslaved Africans, at the edge of the (Western) secular imaginary, resulted in a transformed religion with a distinctly humanistic core. Suggestions for a collective way forward are to be found in critically reviewing the origins of theoretical concepts such as the secular and their practical consequences in the present world. With these new perspectives it is possible to offer understanding and support for the individual, along with the formation of a welcoming humanist community. Finally we must learn to constructively deal with different expressions of religiosity to help us bring together unexpected sources of humanistic thought.

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Preamble

My own community, and particularly my mother, made it possible for me to enjoy religious freedom. When the time came to complete my religious studies in preparation of my confirmation – there was room to express my personal doubts and questions regarding the Roman-Catholic beliefs. I was free to explore a nontheist life from the age of 12. I had no problems expressing myself and finding "sources of strength" outside of religion. There were role models in my family and strong family ties that offered support. Thanks to the open mind of my environment, I had the freedom to *not* go to church anymore.

Even though I was raised in the Netherlands, I was born in Suriname. This country is a melting pot of diverse cultures and religions, and there are not many "openly" non-religious members of society. There is also a significant group that practices some form of ancestor worship brought to Suriname by the enslaved Africans. But even in these circles, there must always be room for God. Religion was constantly present in my upbringing, but it was not mine. In that sense, I have always had a strenuous relationship with religion. I have self-identified as "humanist" since 2011, but this has obviously taken on more meaning since starting my studies at the University of Humanistic Studies. I came to ask myself, what does it mean to be a Black humanist? Through various courses and my internship, I had not yet found the answer. There are quite a few Black humanist writers, but I still found myself fascinated with the concept of religion and the meaning of the religious community for the individual. Not every person has the same experience I had - quite the contrary.

I found that there seems to be an obscure tension between the religious and the secular when Christianity presents itself through Africans in the diaspora. In this thesis, I took the opportunity to research this phenomenon and look for ways to address this tension as a humanistic professional. While we might live in a secular age, our experiences differ as our origin, history and culture shape our perspectives. Taking into account that the dominant worldview and most foundations of academic knowledge are West-European in origin, most of our world is not. What is the meaning of religion and secularity when viewed in this broader context?

The symbol on the cover is a depiction of the *dikenga* or Kongo Cosmogram. It is said to reflect the circle of life and presents many concepts in one image: the human in the universe, and the connection between the material world we inhabit and the spiritual world, reserved for the ancestors (Zauditu-Selassie, 2007:40). It was found in West-African communities as early as 1482 and, centuries later, in what remained of the quarters of enslaved Africans in the United States. Spirituality and religiosity were one of the few things the enslaved managed to bring with them on the Middle Passage. After that, the religious (Christian) community played a central role in plantation societies. With this background, what does it take to embrace the secular, apostatize and live free from religion? And if it is possible - at what cost?

In the second month of my studies in Utrecht, I experienced a struggle with a part of the curriculum, and as a 36-year-old I finally understood what hindered me as an 18-year-old student at Leiden University. As a descendant of enslaved Africans, I could not genuinely relate to authors like Locke and Rousseau, I found myself suspicious of these theories on freedom and justice. Supposed political, social and moral cornerstones of our society today. But what did it mean *to me*? What did these ideas mean in relation to the plight of my ancestors? Almost 20 years later, society and academia has found the language and methods that aid the decolonization of knowledge. Today I find many scholars that question the silence regarding slavery, race and colonialism found in the work of (canonized) humanist thinkers such as, but not limited to Locke and Rousseau. I also found that the effects of colonialism and race are not a large focus of Humanistic Studies (yet). The thinkers that have shaped political thought and most of Western social science were not concerned with issues of racism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the enormous impact of the colonial system. Many scholars are however, attempting to address this gap in our knowledge. And as with all things that *once seen cannot be unseen*; once you acknowledge the impact of colonialism and racism, it cannot be denied. And any analysis of the world we live in, or the lives of individuals – to me – can no longer be complete without taking the weight of these dark pages into account. I invite readers to walk along with me to fill in our blind spots regarding our secular age. What knowledge is not yet employed? What is known, but not yet integrated into our curriculum thanks to the hegemony of Western thought regarding religion and the secular? The focus is on the extensive body of work of Dr. Anthony B. Pinn. His work gives us insight into how religion and secularism work in the context of the African American.

Writing this thesis made me feel like an outsider, looking in, while as a person I have always felt allegiance to African Americans. We have shared ancestors and these have lived through the experience of enslavement. While we are now in different situations, we are part of the same diaspora. In recent years, I have found myself more outspoken and visible in my personal Blackness. Even though I have never been anything else[2], I am no longer opting to assimilate as much as I used to. There has been more space for expressing my background and expressing myself as a person through uncovering previously hidden experiences that have shaped me as a person. The process of writing this thesis has brought insight and discomfort, but also light and hope. May we work towards a future marked by curiosity, understanding and the thirst for knowledge I found in my supervisors. I am forever thankful to have found room to explore this topic while bringing *all of me*.

[2] Pinn (2011:69) channels W.E.B. Du Bois and Baldwin to give words to this this “strange experience”.

1 Introduction

“Oh freedom
Oh freedom
Oh freedom over me!
And before I’d be a slave
I’ll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free.”[3]

This well-known African American spiritual was sung to mark the end of slavery in the United States. In more recent times it has been used as a call for the liberation and equal rights of African Americans when this hymn gained widespread popularity in the civil rights movement - and it was used as a call for freedom from institutionalized oppression. Besides the song being beautiful and full of emotion – going “home” to this “Lord” has always puzzled me. Even though this spiritual is hundreds of years old, religion is still a large part of the Black experience in the United States. Lloyd explores the meaning of race and religion in the United States and finds that there is “significance to the pairing race and religion” (Lloyd, 2016: 1-2). When discussing religion and secularism, there is a presupposed European train of thought and there is almost no attention given to the concept of race (Lloyd, 2016: 4).

This notion, combined with my personal experiences from Suriname, sparked my interest as a student of Humanistic Studies. If race and secularism are intertwined (Lloyd, 2016: 5), what happens when race and religion are examined? The African American has a long history of spirituality. First as Africans, then, through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, came a Christian tradition that took hold of and shaped these communities in the African diaspora. Through an exploration of the meaning of the secular for the African American, through the impact of the slave society and the diaspora, it may be possible to understand what this means for religion and religiosity. What is the meaning of religion, the secular and apostasy for modern day African Americans? The renowned scholar Anthony B. Pinn[4] has dedicated his life's work to understanding the Black religious experience. His work will be central to answer questions about the religious life of the community and the individual that might want to explore a secular life or live as an African American apostate.

[3] https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-freedom-and-freedom-is-coming – Retrieved on October 25 2022

[4] Anthony Pinn Online - https://www.anthonypinn.com/. – Retrieved on November 4 2022

2 Problem statement

It can be stated that religion is an integral part for many inhabitants of the United States (Pinn, 1998:165), as it has been since its inception in 1776. Nonetheless, the U.S. identifies as a secular country (Wilson, 2016:91). Religion and secularism is a commonly monitored phenomenon within the population of the U.S. These surveys show that the number of religious Nones in the American population – those that self-identify as "religiously unaffiliated" – has however been increasing. These include atheists, agnostics and people that classify their religious identity as "nothing in particular". I will refer to this group as Nones or religious Nones. Nationwide this group had grown to a percentage of approximately 15% of the adult population over the years between 1990 and 2008 (Pinn, 2013: 237). In 2021, 29% of respondents nationwide self-identify as a religious None[5].

There are demographic differences in the religious experience for different parts of the American population. Data from the Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Research Center (2007 and 2014) indicated that the number of Black religious Nones stays behind compared to other populations. See table below:

Racial and ethnic composition	Believe in God; absolutely certain	Believe in God; fairly certain	Believe in God; not too/not at all certain	Believe in God; don't know	Do not believe in God	Other/don't know if they believe in God	Sample size
White	61%	20%	5%	1%	11%	3%	24,900
Black	83%	11%	2%	1%	2%	1%	3,394
Asian	44%	23%	12%	1%	19%	2%	937
Latino	59%	26%	6%	1%	6%	1%	3,814
Other/Mixed	66%	18%	5%	1%	8%	3%	1,504

Belief in God by race/ethnicity[6]

When asked, just 6% of the Black respondents in the 2014 sample are not at all certain of a belief in God, with respondents in other groups adding up to percentages as high as 14% (Latino) and 34% (Asian).

[5] About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated | Pew Research Center – Retrieved on November 4 2022

[6] Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Research Center: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition#belief-in-god – Retrieved on October 25 2022

The more recent survey (from 2021) shows a sharp increase in the number of "Nones" in the United States. Compared to a percentage of 29% nationwide, the Pew Research Center reports that 21% of Black U.S. adults identify as a religious None[7]. The gap seems to be closing, but where does this difference come from?

2.1 The community as a "pocket" of religion

This lower rate of religious Nones within African diaspora communities compared to the society in which they find themselves, can also be found outside of the United States – for instance in the Black British population in the United Kingdom. In countries like the U.S. and the U.K. there are still "pockets" of religion within a secularized landscape. For the U.K. this seems to be the result of immigration from so called "faith communities" (Davie, 2010:173). Another example can be found in Suriname, where just 8% of the Surinamese population self-identifies as a religious None[8]. This former Dutch colony, like the rest of the Americas, the Caribbean and Africa was effectively colonized using the bible. The bible had also played a large part in shaping the society of the United States (Pinn, 2017:113). But what does it mean when a Western religion continues to keep its grip on African diaspora communities long after the West has been secularized? At the start of my studies at the University of Humanistic Studies, I became aware of the Association of Black Humanists, located in London. A small, but active group founded to provide a safe space for "budding" humanists. On their Facebook-page[9] we can find more information on their objectives. One quote from Clive Aruede, one of the founders stayed with me, with Clive Aruede referring to the process of becoming a freethinker as "coming out":

> Coming out as a black atheist is not easy, you could be ostracised and demonised.[10]

Besides no longer being accepted by one's social circle, research suggest that this "belief change may have consequences for (…) sense of self and (…) social vulnerability." (Bolton et al. 2020:15). This personal "risk" in "coming out" as a religious None is a fascinating phenomenon also described by Pinn (2013:239).

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[7] https://www.unionreview.org/articles/the-rise-in-black-nones-in-the-us/ – Retrieved on November 4 2022
[8] https://www.parool.nl/kunst-media/herman-vuijsje-onderzocht-religie-in-suriname-waar-92-procent-gelovig-is~bba58cb3/ – Retrieved on October 24 2022
[9] https://www.facebook.com/AssociationBlackHumanists/about/ – Retrieved on November 4 2022
[10] https://metro.co.uk/2014/12/25/metros-unconventional-christmas-message-a-black-atheist-talks-about-the-big-day-4996062/ – Retrieved on November 4 2022

Why is it so hard for someone to try and "lose" their religion? This step might mean the risk of losing important support structures and maybe even parts of their cultural identity – all as a result of a religious disconnect with their community. This "side-effect" of apostasy seems contrary to the promises offered by a secular life posed by Taylor when he speaks of the "advance of expressive individualism" that is "altering our social imaginary" (Taylor, 2007:483). The actual *possibilities offered* by the secular age might not be easily attained by some. The website of the Black Nonbelievers in Atlanta gives an example of a similar experience:

> Because of the role that the church plays in the Black community, it is extremely challenging to openly identify as an atheist or nonbeliever, creating a powerful sense of isolation for many.[11]

What exactly is happening in these communities? Might there be forces that we – as humanists - cannot account for that influence the role religion plays within a community? In what way is it possible to apply secular thought originating from Western-Europe to address issues related to the African American community? To be able to "come out" as a Christian apostate, does it matter where you come from or who you are?

Underlying my research will be the theory presented in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) regarding the ways the West has entered the secular age. With Taylor, I will question whether our notion of secularism is really as universal as one might suppose. Literature on the secular in relation to race will also be explored and we will map out the historical context of the Black religious experience starting with the Middle Passage. Applying the insights from Steven Vertovec's *Religion in Diaspora* (2004), it is possible to trace the development of Black religion. It appears that religion – other than may be the case in Western societies - might serve another purpose and have a different meaning for Black communities. I will focus on a selected number of books by Anthony Pinn to evaluate and reflect on his findings relating to the Black religious experience and Black humanism. What are the exact characteristics of this experience? How does the black religious experience deal with nonbelievers and secularism and what is the role of society and the community? Finally I will look for ways in which humanism can formulate an answer or openings towards the abilities for living a secular life while originating from a religious background.

[11] https://blacknonbelievers.org/who-we-are/ – Retrieved on November 4 2022

2.2 Research question

My main research question is: How can Anthony B. Pinn's work on Black humanism contribute to understanding the tensions between religion and secularity among apostatic African Americans?

Following from this central question, these six sub questions will structure my research in this thesis:

1. How does Charles Taylor's philosophical analysis of the secular age contribute to understanding the tensions between the Black religious experience and secularity? (Chapter 4);
2. What is the impact of the diaspora on the Black religious experience? (Chapter 5);
3. What defines the Black religious experience after the diaspora? (Chapters 6-7);
4. What is the current state of Black humanism in the United States, what are its foundations and in what way does it relate to Western humanist thought? (Chapter 8);
5. What does it mean to be an African American apostate, and does one give meaning to their lives? (Chapter 9-10);
6. How can humanist chaplains attempt to support the individual by gaining understanding of the tension between religion and secularity? (Chapter 11).

2.3 Knowledge aim

Since the publication of *A Secular Age* by Taylor, there have been a number of scholars that have tried to "test" his theory within non-Western societies (such as Bilgrami, 2016). Earlier Asad (2003) asked the question whether secularism could be viewed as "a colonial imposition" (Asad, 2003:21) and points to a less critical examination of the secular when compared to the religious (Asad, 2003:23). Asad calls for a more detailed study of the concept of secularism. Even though these scholars have assumed a valuable position and offer an addition to Taylor, there have been no attempts to examine the theories of the secular as outlined by Taylor on distinct *communities within* Western secular societies. In this study, I will research the dynamics which may be influential on what I will call "pockets of faith" within a secularized landscape. This may yield valuable knowledge which is relevant in the context of globalization and concomitant migration of communities with a stronger religious background into secularized societies. When immigrants find themselves *embedded* within a community of people of similar backgrounds, their religious affiliation is likely to be higher than that of individuals with less or weaker ties to "co-ethnics" (Van Tubergen, 2007:757-759). The thesis can generate a broader understanding of how religion and secularity work in

groups with a non-Western Christian background when they find themselves in a "secular receiving context" (Van Tubergen 2007:747). Inspired by Van Tubergen, it is possible to regard the United States as a similar (politically) secular receiving context where the enslaved African was introduced. The influence and limitations of contemplating the Black religious experience within the context of diaspora will be discussed in accordance with the work of Steven Vertovec (2004).

To find out *why* it can be so difficult for individuals from the African diaspora in the United States to *lose* one's religion, I will analyze relevant work of Anthony Pinn, who works at the intersections of African American religion, constructive theology and humanist thought. This study will focus on the role of religion and humanism in the context of the Black religious experience. One major inspiration comes from Johnson who stated: "If religions are sometimes the cause of diasporas, diasporas sometimes make religions." (Johnson, 2007:42). This statement certainly seems on point in a study on the interaction between African religion and Christianity and how the African American community shaped its religious experience. Through this thesis I aim to shed light on the "transformative potentials of religion in diaspora" (Vertovec, 2004:8). By investigating the Black religious experience and Black humanism, I seek to identify and analyze the obstacles to apostasy that may exist for those who are still held close by Black religious communities. The main research objective is to find out what dilemmas may exist that cause or contribute to different patterns of secularization within African American communities with regards to the tension between Black religiosity and apostasy towards humanism.

2.4 Practical aim

I find it interesting to understand what happens when individuals descending from religious African American communities find themselves attempting to live a life not affiliated to any religion. Even though the religious experience can offer solace and belonging to members of the African American population (Streib & Klein, 2013:15), being a part of a strong religious community can also be a burden for the freethinking individual. This is confirmed by Pinn (2013) who states:

> Overwhelming belief in God and other markers of traditional religiosity within African American communities make status as a None somewhat risky.
> (Pinn, 2013:239)

In other words, “stepping” out of this religious community and culture is something that can be done, but at a cost. In my research I will set out to understand what could explain the relatively lower numbers of religious Nones within African American communities when compared to the population in the United States as a whole. Freedom from religion can serve as an important way forward towards empowerment and fulfillment; “self-assertion” and the opportunity to live one's own life as one pleases (Pinn, 1995:156).

The practical aim of this study is to equip humanist chaplains with new insights into what humanism as an alternative worldview could offer apostates from African American communities. Can humanism contribute to the empowerment of non-religious African Americans within their communities? Could humanism, as a way to relate to religiosity, offer individuals space to express themselves freely? As such, my findings may also open the discussion on how humanism could inspire and support self-actualization among non-Christian religious communities of migrants in Western Europe. These are insights that may not be common knowledge among humanistic practitioners who are generally brought up in Western culture – in which the legacy of religion carries a different weight and takes on different forms.

3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Tracking religious transformation

In answering *why* the secular age has not yet brought religious freedom for all residing in the West, it is important to share *how* the secular age as we know it came to be. Using Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), I will question whether secularity is really as universal as one might suppose. There have been some reflections and books written on secularity in the context of non-Western parts of society, but for the study of the Black religious experience, I found the critical views in *Formations of the Secular* (2003) by Talal Asad most fitting, since his work takes the impact of colonialism on religion and secularity into account.
Secondly, I view the secular in the light of the African American; the chapter by Josef Sorett in *Race and Secularism in America* (2016) offers a broad introduction to the position of Black religion in the light of secularism from the colonial to the modern age. There will be an exploration of the transformation in the meaning of religion *through* diaspora with *Religion and Diaspora* (Vertovec, 2004) and *Diaspora Conversions: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa* (Johnson, 2007).

3.2 The Black religious experience

I will turn my focus to parts of the body of work of Anthony Pinn to evaluate and reflect on his findings relating to the Black religious experience. The outlines of this religious experience will be viewed through the framework of "socio-religious domains" presented by Vertovec (2004:17). The impact of this particular diaspora on religion will be traced via *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Pinn, 2022) and *What is African American Religion?* (Pinn, 2011). Anthony Pinn has proposed new ways to view the Black religious experience; through acknowledging the need for agency and transformation of Black identity. In *What is African American religion* (2011), Pinn offers us a definition:

> (…) the recognition of and response to the elemental feeling for complex subjectivity and the accompanying transformation of consciousness that allows for the historically manifest battle against the terror of fixed identity" (Pinn, 2011:95).

This means that religion can offer a way to retain ownership of one's identity. Religion, other than may be the case in Western societies, might serve this particular purpose and have a different meaning for Black communities.

3.3 Black humanism and disbelief

Consequently I will compose an outline of the Black religious experience with a focus on observations relating to secularity and the emergence of Black humanism. This account starts with *Why, Lord ?* (Pinn, 1995), this book gives insight into how form and function of religion and Black humanism were historically and culturally influenced for the African American. Anthony Pinn also dedicates a chapter of *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Pinn, 1998) to his observations on humanism within different demographics, from Europe to the United States in general and African Americans specifically.

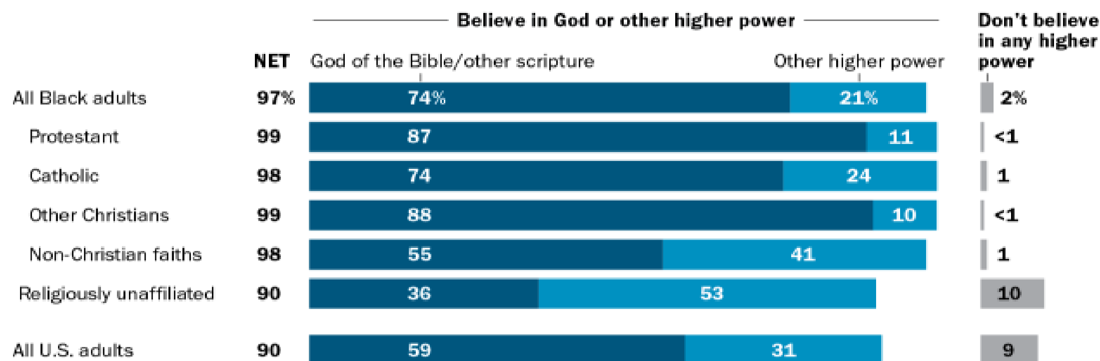
In *Why, Lord ?*(Pinn, 1995), Pinn describes two types of humanism that can be found; the first being "weak" or soft humanism – one where there is still a place for God; "(…) a coworker relationship between god and humanity; both must work together toward liberation" (Pinn, 1995:146). This can also be found in the message of Achille Mbembe as noted in Vincent Lloyd's *Religion of the Field Negro* (2017): "To embrace the human means, in Mbembe's idiom, to embrace the divine, to embrace the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is to acknowledge the limits of the ways of the world, to recognize the impotence of the powers that be, and to enlist that characteristically human ability to combine reason, emotion, imagination, and practical wisdom to find new ways of living" (Lloyd, 2017:66).

The moral position and function of God is, however, often a given in Black theology – those that doubt whether God is inherently good "are ostracized from the Black tradition" (Pinn, 1995:146). According to Pinn, Black religion can also be paralleled to the "creative struggle in history for increased agency, for a fullness of life" (Pinn, 2002:173). This use of the term "struggle" implies that there is not just looking up, there is work to be done as a human within the framework of religion. A second "strong" humanist position is also defined – one in which the individual decides that when religion *brings* pain – he chooses not to rely solely on God, Pinn summarizes this as "(….) an unwillingness to accept a tradition that simply intensifies pain." (Pinn, 1995,147). This "strong" humanism takes form and function to aid the emancipation of African Americans through "self-expression" (Pinn, 1995, 151) and eventually "asserting one's value as a human being and working to act upon this value." (Pinn, 1995, 152). Religious orientation, like many traditional binaries, appears to also exist on a spectrum for nontheists (Pinn, 1995:19).

3.4 Being a Black religious None

Almost all Black Americans believe in God or another higher power

% of Black Americans who say they ...



Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.
Note: Those who gave unclear responses about the type of God they believe in are included in the NET but not shown. Those who did not answer the questions about belief in God are not shown.
"Faith Among Black Americans"

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The impact and meaning of the secular age within Black communities will be further investigated and critically reviewed by applying different perspectives on secularism that have been formulated by Taylor in *A secular age* (2007) and Asad in *Formations of the secular* (2003). Maybe more importantly, being a religious None does not mean there is no belief in a higher power, according to reports from the Pew Research Center in 2020[12], 53% of Black religious Nones still believe in a "higher power". Streib & Klein (2013) bring further nuance to what it may mean to self-identify as a religious None. Being "religiously unaffiliated does not necessarily mean that someone is not "still attached to their (former) religious traditions" (Streib & Klein, 2013:5). How exactly does an African American apostate identify in terms of religion and the secular and can we apply Western humanist thought to this phenomenon? For the definition and understanding of the difference between different types of Nones we see in our society, we turn to *Apostasy, agnostics, and apostates* (Streib & Klein, 2013) and *Introducing African American Religion* (Pinn, 2013).

3.5 Developing new perspectives

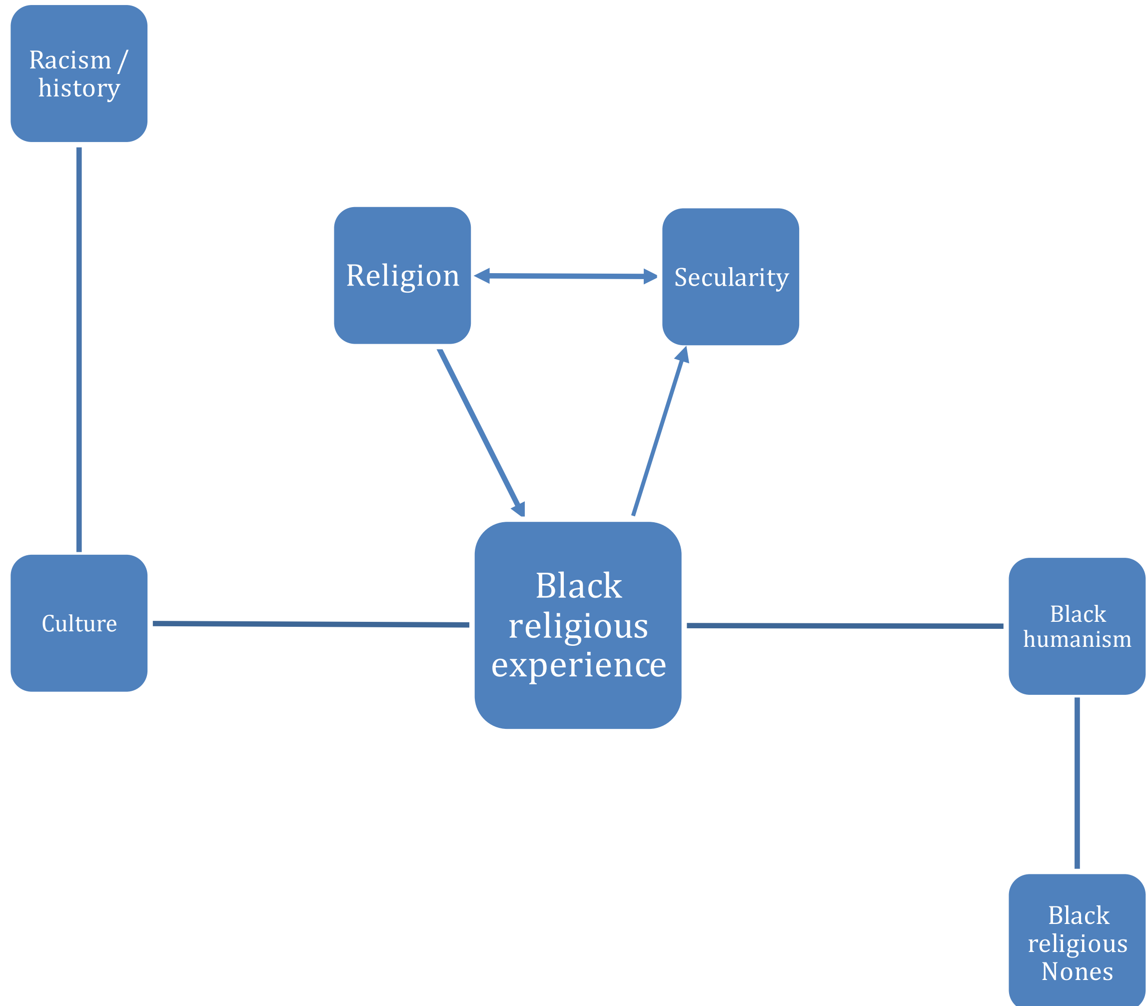
Finally, after gaining a better understanding of the Black religious experience and apostasy, it will be useful to apply the message of *When colorblindness isn't the answer* (2017) to the practices of humanists in order to aid and support the individual freethinker.

[12] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/24/three-quarters-of-black-americans-believe-in-god-of-the-bible-or-other-holy-scripture/ – Retrieved on November 5 2022.

In the end, this philosophical work will result in a discussion and recommendations that can be applied by humanistic chaplains and fellow researchers of theology and humanistic studies. The perspectives from this study will be transferred to the Dutch context; the Netherlands is a country with many diasporic communities, each with their own religious experience. Davie (2010) and Van Tubergen (2007) point to the significant impact a religious community can have on the individual that might have different views towards their own religious tradition. A better understanding of this phenomenon may open up ways in which humanism can formulate an answer or opening towards the ability to live a secular life while originating from a religious community. It is important for spiritual care workers to be aware of the specific role religious affiliation and religious freedom might play in the lives of migrants.

3.6 Methodology

To comprehend the relationship between religion and secularism within the African American community, I will analyze the meaning of religion for African Americans through a philosophical analysis of the work of Anthony Pinn. After reviewing our understanding of the secular age it is possible to thematically reflect on the form and function of the Black religious experience and Black humanism.



Starting from the historic context of the African American, it is possible to discern the emergence of the Black religious experience. The formation of the Black religious experience was influenced by religion (mainly Christianity), yet always contained elements of secularity. From these elements Black humanism was formed, leading to a diversity of Black religious Nones in the present.

4 The universality of the secular: a discussion of Charles Taylor's analyses

The following chapter will answer the first sub question: "How does Charles Taylor's philosophical analysis of the secular age contribute to understanding the tensions between the Black religious experience and secularity?" As mentioned in the preamble, the work of authoritative philosophers that shaped society in modernity and the Enlightenment did not have the same meaning for the enslaved population then and to their descendants now. By disregarding the "issue" of race, two parallel dimensions were created. There was Europe, reaping the benefits of colonialism through wealth but in practice a relatively homogenous society, countered by the slave societies that could be found in the colonies and the United States. The "issue" of race was to be dealt with strictly in a commercial or legal sense. Perhaps the largest expression of dehumanization of the enslaved is still present, in the silence regarding racism in defining philosophies that continue to shape foundations of social order. And for us to be able to understand the current tensions between religion and secularity, it is important to critically review our understanding of the secular within the context of the slave society.

4.1 Shaping the secular imaginary

It is only logical that this (racial) divide *spilled over* into theology and the development of theories regarding religion and the secular. And when doing research into the religious experience of Africans in the diaspora – it became impossible not to talk about race. Admittedly, race is no longer the hushed up subject it used to be, but we still have a long way to go. Most people and even most academics would rather not go there. With this in mind, in this chapter the theoretical views of Charles Taylor regarding the secular age will be employed critically. What can Taylor add to our knowledge of the Black religious experience, and where might we find shortcomings in this universal theory? In dissecting the way the secular came to be, we might begin to answer our question; how does a secular individual deal with a religious past? Taylor describes the "disenchantment" and the "coming of age" of "unbelief" as a process spanning hundreds of years (Taylor, 2007:374-375). He describes several different localities in the West where the role of the church and belief diminished and the secular became the norm, for society and for the individual (Taylor, 2007: 423). The problematic part of the theory is that this step into modernity did not apply to the enslaved Africans even generations after the trans-Atlantic slave trade ended.

Taylor refers to the "modern social imaginary" as a "moral order" or a way to work together for the benefit of society *as a whole*:

> It tells us something about how we ought to live together in society. (…) The moral background is one of natural rights; these people already have certain moral obligations towards each other. The ends sought are certain common benefits, of which security is the most important."
>
> (Taylor, 2007:159).

4.2 Enlightenment and modernity

The idea of "myth" and the accompanying "disenchantment" stems from a number of dichotomies that can be found in the secular discourse (Asad, 2003:23). The term "secular" itself was coined as an attempt of British freethinkers to *rebrand* not believing – and to rid themselves of the stigma surrounding apostasy (Asad, 2003:23). In this sense, the secular was born from opposing positions. This opposition shifted – through the Enlightenment - from an "older opposition between sacred and profane" to "a new opposition between imagination and reason" (Asad, 2003:29). The struggle between reason and imagination led to the dismissal of myth (Asad, 2003: 29) as "inferior" and its representation as a *tool* representing otherness (Asad, 2003:30). The hegemony of the secular discourse has – perhaps artificially, but successfully – "separated the sacred from the secular" (Asad, 2003:43) and thus continued to shape our society. It can be argued that this binary might once have been part of the Western lived experience, but this cannot be assumed for all communities, at least not the African American.

Again, this theory is not disputed, but the universal effect can be questioned. Where the enslaved were not seen as part of the social order, or having natural rights as human beings, the Enlightenment did not offer the benefits of security and freedom *for all*. This led to the birth of parallel communities within the same society. Asad (2003) states that secularism arose in a specific part of the world; "modern Euro-America" (Asad, 2003:1) and that secular thought had a profound impact on historic intolerance in America (Asad, 2003:7). A secular (nation) state can also emphasize differences between communities, drawing attention to *others* – most often in the form of religious minorities (Asad, 2003:8). Being a part of a secular nation is much easier when one is part of the majority. Secularism is, according to Asad, a part of the "project" of modernity; a way for the West to present an image, that serves a purpose, but may also be an idea that has different meanings – even within the West itself (Asad, 2003:13).

The “categories of the secular and the religious” came to serve as a measure of modernity, where modernity became something to aspire to (Asad, 2003:14). In that sense it can be said that, according to Asad, we were made to believe a fabricated or false dichotomy. In the real world, there may be “no significant binary features, (and) that it is, on the contrary, divided into overlapping, fragmented cultures, hybrid selves” (Asad, 2003:15).

4.3 The secular in the slave society

Taylor dedicates parts of his book to the United States and recognizes the overall higher level of religiosity of society. This might be a result of the fact that the United States has always consisted of a migrant population, that made use of religion and churches (Taylor, 2007:523) and formed a new and unifying “civil religion” (Taylor, 523-524), despite having groups that belong to different (religious) backgrounds. Religion came to be an essential part of expressing or integrating oneself as an American, which might explain the religious nature of the United States, especially when compared to Europe (Taylor, 2007: 527). Taylor also takes note of the “other major dimension” of diversity within the United States that sits in contrast to the embrace of religious diversity of its citizens:

> (…) that other dimension of diversity, race, which has continued to be deeply problematical.
> (Taylor, 2007:524)

The timing of the formation of the United States brought different battles to society, but the text does not give much weight to the fact that perhaps the greatest difference between continental Europe and the United States rests in the fact that the latter was a slave society. Taylor’s analysis stops there and in his analysis, race can again be seen as somewhat of a blind spot. If race and racism influenced the Black religious experience, in what way has the racial divide influenced the religious experience of the hegemonic white population? The perception of race, brought by European immigrants to the United States, was substantiated with the bible (Pinn, 2017:37), which in turn set the parameters for society as a whole:

> It is easier to be unreservedly confident in your own rightness
> when you are the hegemonic power.
> (Taylor, 2007:528)

4.4 The secular vs. the African American community

The United States has always been a secular state but the implications for its inhabitants were not similar. The "secular experience" as such has had different layers and in this the African American was challenged to adapt to society with a philosophy of modernity and secularism that was designed *by others* and *for others*. Not every member of society could freely choose how to position themselves; the "culture of immanence" was limited (Taylor, 2007:600). Taylor refers to one of the results of secularity as "disembedding" (Taylor, 2007:146); the ability to see ourselves – our identity - as individuals in a different position:

> From the standpoint of the individual's sense of self, it means the inability to imagine oneself outside a certain matrix. But it also can be understood as a social reality (…). And we can see that it is growing up in a world where this kind of social imaginary reigns which sets the limits to our sense of self.
>
> (Taylor, 2007:149-150)

If we follow Taylor, the "measure of our disembedding" (Taylor, 2007:149) can be weighed in the options for distancing ourselves from society. In this way, the African American was effectively brought to the edge of the secular imaginary – but not quite part of it (Pinn, 2011:13). Forging communities and forging an identity in dehumanizing conditions required flexibility and most of the time ingenious ways to connect with each other. *Race and Secularism in America* (2016) introduces "the trope of black sacred/secular fluidity" (Sorrett, 2016:47) and challenges the assumption that the Black community "does not make distinctions" (Sorrett, 2016:45) between the secular and sacred. Rather, the two should be viewed in relation to each other - mediated by the factor *race.*

> (...) the modern black identity (…) entailed a pronounced confirmation that the two – race and religion, colonialism and Christianity – were co-constitutive in the modern world.
>
> (Sorett, 2016:51)

Society lacked the infrastructure wherein Black people could unite and form social bonds *outside* of the church. In that sense the African American found themselves in a society where the church "could not afford (…) being concerned solely with sacred matters" (Sorett, 2016:58).

Paradoxically, the larger society of the United States, in which the descendants of enslaved were embedded, gave priority to the discourse and policies of secularization. In these conditions "(…) sacred/secular fluidity was the forced hand" (Sorett, 2016:58) for the African American. Later chapters explore the profound impact this starting point of the Black religious experience continues to have to this day; through the diaspora and the confines of the slave society.

4.5 Redefining the secular

Inspired by a lack of tangible freedoms in the lives of the enslaved, a different, but similar movement towards the secular took place within this diaspora community. There was indeed disenchantment, but rather coming from the way the God of the Christians *was presented to* the African American. The Glory of God did not seem to extend to *all* people and in addition to that, there was a lack of *humanity*. In the lived experience of the enslaved African American, it was best to not rely on God to take care of you in this life, but instead to rely on members of the own community. And to use religion as a means of working towards the reality of a better life – not just in the afterlife, but also on this earth.

So through the diverse shapes and forms of Black religion, there have always been forms of Black humanism. Even though the opposition between the sacred and secular might be less pronounced in the African American community, when looking closer, the conclusion can be that this does not have to matter for the ability to position yourself at any place within a so called "religious spectrum" (Pinn, 1995:19), but that there are boundaries formed by the community and the identity that you are given.

The impact of race and society on expressing religiosity at a community level and (subsequently) at an individual level has been studied since 1980, but there are still processes and effects that need further understanding. Especially the appearance and form of the secular in relation to the African American community deserves some attention before exploring Black religion and Black humanism in later chapters. By not being equal parts of their environment, the enslaved African Americans also had the freedom *not to* entertain the idea of the sacred/secular divide. Even though there are a number of possible explanations for this, one interpretation renders this fluidity an expression of "agency and active resistance" to their position within the United States (Sorett, 2016:60). In all, this makes the question of Black humanism and the Black secular even more interesting as we attempt to investigate in what way these end states were influenced by a colonial, religious society.

Where the Western (white) world experienced a secular movement that opened up possibilities, the enslaved African and its descendants have faced, and continue to face a "quest for complex subjectivity" (Pinn, 2022:157). A call to come into being for themselves and as they are. Not just as defined by the majority. Even though Taylor's general theory regarding the "cross pressures" between the sacred and the secular remains (Taylor, 2007:595), it does not address the distance between distinctive experiences within the same society. Our question should not be: "How does Charles Taylor's philosophical analysis of the secular age contribute to understanding the tensions between the Black religious experience and secularity? Instead, the question should be: "Does Charles Taylor's analysis contribute to understanding the tensions between the Black religious experience and secularity *at all*?"

Unfortunately, it may not. There are different factors and motives driving the secular in relation to the religious when it comes to Western parts of society when compared to the experience of the African American. These discrepancies shows the gap in the theory offered by Taylor when applied to questions regarding the secularization of African Americans. Where Western secularism was inspired by resistance to oppression *from* religion and the church – Black religion offered African Americans a way to relate to the world – expressing themselves – and finding a way of *being* in the environment of a secular – but more importantly - segregated society. In that sense, the secular age had not (yet) managed to offer (religious) freedom to all through the unwelcoming character and perpetuation of blind spots regarding race in the frames of thought the secular age has employed. The community, however had formulated its *own* secular response. This movement remained unseen for a long period of time. This thesis seeks to uncover this process and the "coming of age" of Black humanism within the context of the Black religious experience in order to understand the dilemmas faced by the community and the individual to this day.

5 Religion in diaspora: a discussion with Steven Vertovec

Apart from the attention to our understanding of the secular, the workings of the secular within non-Western communities, and the influence of colonialism and race in the previous chapter, we cannot ignore the crucial role of the diaspora itself. Before exploring the meaning of religion, the secular and humanism in the context of African Americans, we first shift our attention to the roots of African American religion, as it came to existence after the diaspora. This chapter explores the second sub question: “What is the impact of the diaspora on the Black religious experience?” Anthropologist Steven Vertovec is an expert regarding migration, diversity and diaspora. His work on religion in diaspora offers a new perspective through which the Black religious experience as presented by Anthony Pinn can be reviewed. This religious experience has been studied extensively by Anthony Pinn – not as strictly diasporic – but born from extraordinary circumstances. Since the Black religious experience and ultimately Black humanism were shaped from these circumstances, understanding diaspora might add to understanding how religion and secularity relate to each other within the African American community.

5.1 Defining diaspora

Diaspora as an idea, or interest, has grown in the past years, with an ever-growing number of communities self-identifying as part of a diaspora (Vertovec, 2004:1,4). Vertovec recognizes the topic of religion as being relatively understudied in the context of diaspora (Vertovec, 2004:1). More recent literature shows this is changing, but the initial framework presented by Vertovec still offers insights. Studying religion *in* diaspora might be applied to understand “dynamics of religious transformation” or “patterns of religious change”. Since 1966 there has been attention for the African Diaspora as a “discursive entity” (Johnson, 2007:51). Diaspora as a concept can be defined in a number of different ways, but a general, accepted meaning stems from the “Jewish history of displacement” (Vertovec, 2004:2). The general definition places diaspora within dimensions of both time and space:

> That is, when we say something has taken place “in the diaspora” we must clarify whether we refer to (a) the *process* of becoming scattered, (b) the *community* living in foreign parts, or (c) the *place* or geographic space in which the dispersed groups live. (Vertovec, 2004:2-3)

As far as the African American diaspora is concerned, all elements (a, b and c) are relevant when regarding the evolution of the Black religious experience. In a way, the effects of this diaspora, though technically finalized (a) hundreds of years ago, are still very present. I start by comparing the situation of the enslaved African and its descendants with the opinions posed by Vertovec and Johnson regarding diasporas.

In chapter 6 and 7, we trace the workings of religion in diaspora through *Terror and Triumph* (Pinn, 2022) and *What is African American Religion* (Pinn, 2011). It is however also important to note that most of the United States is comprised of migrant populations from diverse homelands, each bringing their own religious experience. But the *displacement* characterized by the trans-Atlantic slave trade followed by the dehumanizing process of slavery and objectification of the Black body (Pinn, 2022:37) was indeed unique to the African American.

5.2 Characteristics of diaspora

When considering the different rates of secularization for African Americans compared to other communities within the United States (as seen in data presented to us through surveys) and the possibility that secularism might not have been *as relatable* for African Americans living in the United States (due to failing to appreciate the existence of racism as a variable), it might be just to give more attention to the transformative effects of this particular diaspora on Black religion. Vertovec (2004) offers us a list of characteristics:

Table 1.1 Common Features of a Diaspora (Cohen 1997: 26, after Safran 1991)
1. **Dispersal** from an original homeland, often **traumatically**, to two or more foreign regions;
2. alternatively, the **expansion from a homeland** in search of work, in pursuit of trade or **to further colonial ambitions**;
3. **a collective memory and myth** about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements;
4. an idealization of the putative ancestral home and **a collective commitment to its maintenance**, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;
5. the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation;
6. a strong ethnic **group consciousness** sustained over a long time and **based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate**;

7. a **troubled relationship with host societies**, suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group;
8. a sense of **empathy and solidarity** with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; and
9. the **possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life** in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.

(Source: Vertovec, 2004:7 – emphasis mine)

In the case of African Americans, almost all common features from the previous table can be observed as integral parts of the Black religious experience. With the passing of time, return to the homeland disappeared as a viable option for most descendants of the enslaved. Instead of this "return movement" that is common in diasporas, the focus was placed on a "historical liberation from terror" (Pinn, 2022:81) through religion.

5.3 Transformation through diaspora and displacement

The concept of diaspora alone does not seem to cover the particular situation of the African American. Johnson (2007) brings other perspectives to our attention, for instance this argument that can be applied to disregard the concept of diaspora when viewing African American religious experience:

> (…) a community that is entirely uprooted to a new homeland is no longer dispersed; it remains "intact," merely in a new place, and the key spatial feature of diaspora, the engagement of hostland and homeland communities across a gap, is forfeit. (Johnson, 2007:34)

Applying this definition – or view – of the community of enslaved African Americans, resolves the lack of connection between homeland and hostland communities. It can also be questioned whether a "full community" was uprooted. In practice the enslaved were parts of other communities before the Middle Passage (Pinn, 2022:33). In the new communities they formed as African Americans, any connection between the two localities was severed.

The next quote shows a different argument against classifying the African American diaspora as an “active diaspora”:

> Next, at least as a logical possibility, we can imagine a group that remains dislocated from a homeland community but which so fully assimilates in the hostland that it is no longer cognizant of the homeland and abandons the sort of “co-responsibility” that is constitutive of active diasporas
>
> (Johnson, 2007:34)

5.4 Disconnection and exclusion of the diaspora community

Johnson describes a level of assimilation or acceptance into the host community that, due to the issues with racism, has yet to be attained. The earlier table makes use of the somewhat euphemistic “troubled relationship” that might exist with the “host society” (Vertovec, 2004:7). We have to accept that, even though it is not desired or people may not see this as a conscious effort (Johnson, 2007:35), most descendants of enslaved Africans do have to deal with diaspora or displacement as part of their reality. Johnson points us to the connection with race:

> Membership in the African Diaspora is not usually a selective identity, because its racial correlation with blackness is imposed rather than chosen. Though it can be more or less embraced as an individual expression, that choice occurs in a larger context of imposed identity.”
>
> (Johnson, 2007:49)

It appears that the “fixed identity” (race) functions as a *limit* or *frame* for one's identity. This imposed or fixed identity combined with the "troubled" relationship of the hostland clouds the analysis of the diasporic experience. The definitions of diaspora do not completely encompass the African American experience; the literature reviewed does not take the impact of the marginalized position (as an economic object) of the African American into account. Even though this process of displacement agrees with certain general diasporic characteristics, while not meeting others, it is still possible to see if it has been transformative in regards to religion. Technically, a diaspora might lead to a *disconnect* with the homeland, leading to *assimilation*. An interesting premise when viewed as the *embedding* of a community within an increasingly secular “hostland”.

However, existing social structures may exclude diaspora communities from the larger society, due to a "lack of acceptance" (Vertovec, 2004:7) or a troubling or oppressive "imposed identity" (Johnson, 2007:49). This exclusion from the secular hostland meant that the African American was not addressed by the *promise* of the secular regarding the potential of living a full life. Instead, we must give priority to the experience of displacement and objectification as factors while acknowledging that a particular diasporic religious experience has taken place for the African American community. To better understand this transformation, we again turn to Vertovec (2004). As previously discussed, diaspora brings about changes in the expression of religion:

> The "diasporic duality of continuity and change" is evident in a number of socio-religious domains.
> (Vertovec, 2004:17)

Since the experience for the African American was not solely influenced by a diaspora, but complicated by the conditions in the slave society, a general framework from the theory of Vertovec will be integrated in order to better understand the role of diaspora. The next two chapters will investigate whether the patterns of change are also discernible for African Americans in particular by reviewing the Black religious experience as discussed by Pinn. Vertovec outlines a few "patterns of change" (Vertovec, 2004:17) that can be identified in diaspora through different religious groups on different continents:

1. Identity and community – individual and collective identities change with the passing of time and the adaptation to circumstances;
2. Ritual practice – the "negotiation" of religious practice to form connections;
3. Re-spatialization – claiming new cultural spaces, or "ritual sacralization of space";
4. Religion/culture - conflicting notions, or the removal of religion as a basis for identity.

These patterns of change, within the context of the oppressive conditions within the hostland, forged a unique and also comprehensive religious experience. Out of necessity, this Black religious experience accommodated a diversity of expressions of religiosity. The patterns of change will be discussed in chapter 6 and 7.

6 Racism, history and Black religion

We omit many of the statements (…)
because we do not wish to dwell unnecessarily upon this painful scene.[13]

If it were too painful to relay the direct effects of the slave trade on the lives of the enslaved for abolitionists, it is understandable that it can be equally painful to investigate and discover the many *indirect* mechanisms that have harmed enslaved African Americans and their descendants. A collective experience of the difficulties of living a fulfilled life, as often experienced through diaspora, was aggravated by the conditions of the process of displacement, treatment of the community as less than human and the reality of life in a society unwelcoming to their Black bodies. The next two chapters address sub question three: "What defines the Black religious experience after the diaspora?" In his work, Anthony Pinn argues that the context of the enslaved African was formative for the constitution of the Black religious experience, this context also inspired the outline of a novel relationship between religion and secularity. For the sake of this thesis, we *do* look closer to be able to investigate exactly how Black religion was born in the messy grounds of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, birthed by a displaced community.

6.1 Culture under pressure

There is an interesting side-note to take before analyzing the impact of this displacement on religion. Namely the cultural mass of what the enslaved took with them: the folk tales and stories that survived the Middle Passage. Before finding themselves objectified in this new society, the enslaved were first and foremost Africans. The Dutch sociologist and literature researcher Lieke van Duin (1995) has analyzed the Afro-Caribbean folk tales of the spider Anansi as part of the formation of a Dutch "multicultural canon[14]". These folk tales can be found in various parts of the diaspora and speak to the cultural heritage of the enslaved.

[13] Friends, S. O. N. E. Y. M. (1842) *An appeal to the professors of Christianity*. Providence, Printed by Knowles and Vose. [Pdf] – Retrieved on 27 December 2022 from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/11008364/.
[14] https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/duin008anan01_01/duin008anan01_01_0001.php – Retrieved on 9 January 2023 from the Digital Library of Dutch Literature – DBNL (KB, National Library).

The stories about this trickster with West-African roots, called Anansesem, revolve around his chaotic life and his questionable ability to play with life's circumstances in such a way that *he* ultimately benefits most. Usually to the detriment of others, such as the ones that place their trust in him. In the homeland, the Anansi folklore had a function to tell stories, but these stories also offered lessons; on how to treat others or how (not) to conduct oneself.
Van Duin offers an interesting transformation of the social value and contribution of these folk tales through the displacement of the enslaved. Since the original text is in Dutch, a translation is offered here:

> Comfort and protest
> With the slave transports, from the sixteenth well into the nineteenth century, the Anansesem went with them to the 'new world'. A brutal regime prevailed on the plantations. Expressions of one's own culture were forbidden. But you could tell stories about Kwaku Ananse anywhere, even in silence, without drawing attention to yourself.
>
> Thus the stories became a comfort in the face of oppression.
> They were given – and this is important – a protest function.
> As the protest function increased, the mythical-religious function declined.
> The creator god Nyankopon secularized to an earthly king or village chief. (…)
> The stories were distorted (…)
> It was as if the stories were given a new impulse under the pressure of circumstances.
> (Van Duin, 1995[15])

Using this example, we can also consider the spiritual life of the enslaved as having *migrated* with them, brought into the new context and being transformed *by* this context.
The parts of culture that were transferred overseas, were applied to serve the new needs of the community. The old "theatre" of the trickster and the god disappeared and were replaced by a context closer to reality; the trickster saw himself positioned among other humans. Through the Anansesem, the enslaved were able to relate to their present circumstances and covertly rebel against them. A similar pattern can be recognized when it comes to the expression of Black religion, which will be discussed in chapter 7.

[15] https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/duin008anan01_01/duin008anan01_01_0001.php. Retrieved on 9 January 2023 from the Digital Library of Dutch Literature – DBNL (KB, National Library).

6.2 Patterns of change: identity and community

The changes in identity and community were not just influenced by the diaspora or displacement itself, but even more so by the larger society wherein the African Americans found themselves. This context shaped identity, community and culture and was formative to the Black religious experience. In chapter 4 the framework or rationale that “helped” the African *become the other* has been presented to us; the logic and reason that had fueled thought in modernity. Guided by scripture, a definitive “order” (Pinn, 2022:6) was installed. The African was deemed inferior to the European. Later on, parallel to the end of the Enlightenment, the definitive juridification of the Black body came into effect within the United States (Pinn, 2022:11-12). Through this “development” of the slave system, over hundreds of years, one “consistent assumption existed that Blacks should have a restricted and determined identity.” (Pinn, 2022:13). Because of this restricted identity, as literal legal property, there were no options for the enslaved for developing a “social existence” (Pinn, 2022:15) outside of the confines of the Black community.

In *Terror and Triumph* Pinn defines the auction block as the ritual used to celebrate the dehumanization of the African (Pinn, 2022:49). The auction left them “both existentially and ontologically inferior” while at the same time instilling in them a “sense of dread and terror” (Pinn, 2022:47). The ritualized objectification of the slave auction, contributed to the dis-positioning or expulsion of the African American – away from humanity and society. Even after the abolition of slavery, due to the perceived threat to the carefully maintained social order (the hierarchy of the slave society), there was no escaping this “fixed identity” (Pinn, 2022:19). First as an economic object, later as human, but “incapable of full participation in the life of society” (Pinn, 2022:19). After the abolition, dehumanization did not only present itself in the form of economically motivated behaviors, but also in the structure of society. The consistently limited identity ascribed to the once enslaved African American still posed many challenges for freed Blacks (Pinn, 2022:58).

6.3 Patterns of change: ritual practice

Regarding the spirituality of the enslaved Africans in the United States that found themselves part of a diaspora, came the need to relate – as humans - to their circumstances. Pinn argues "the sense of terror and dread (…) gave rise to the historical manifestation of religiosity" (Pinn, 2022:81) now known as the base or foundation of the Black religious experience.

The creation of the "fixed identity" surrounding Black existence led to the formation of Black religion which became a struggle against the terror of dehumanization, striving to achieve liberation (Pinn, 2022:81-82). Here Pinn builds on the premise of "religion as human construction" (Pinn, 2022:81), with the African American in need building or organizing religion in a way that fits the dynamic that characterizes the needs of their community (Pinn, 2022:83). It is perhaps from this starting point of a responsive and flexible conception of religion, that the diversity found within the African American community naturally got to be part of the religious repertoire.

As part of life on the plantation, there was some institutionalized religion offered to the enslaved. This message more often served the justification of the position of the enslaved (Pinn, 2022:83), rather than applying a message of salvation. There are many references to enslaved African Americans taking the little spare time that could be found – mostly at night – to pray and "develop(ed) a response to their existential condition." (Pinn, 2022:84). Although gatherings were prohibited by strict laws and were kept in an atmosphere of secrecy, the culture that was created offered the enslaved options – to view themselves and the community in a state of fullness, with a veil of Christianity, just to be safe. The following quote describes the function of spirituals - the early gospel songs - one of the best-known expressions of Black religion:

> Messages in these songs were coded so that whites who might hear them sung outside hush-arbor gatherings would think of the tunes as referring only to an otherworldly spirituality, which posed no threat to the social system. For slaves, however, the message was much more subversive, it spoke to the importance of Black lives in the sight of God. (Pinn, 2022:85)

Besides the use of scripture as a justification for enslavement, the enslaved themselves also sought and found inspiration in the narratives presented in the bible – especially the story of Exodus "helped them to make sense out of their enslavement" (Pinn, 2022:85). These three examples of gathering to form a community (1), expressions of aspirations through song (2) and reflecting on personal circumstance through scripture (3) show various parts of the Black religious experience. Born from necessity, African Americans sought places where they could be "responsible for their own development" (Pinn, 2022:88).

7 The Black religious experience

(…) religion, in this case African American religion, stems from the terror of losing oneself, having one's very own being stripped away.

(Pinn, 2011:45)

In the last chapters we stepped closer into the *becoming* of the Black religious experience. Now we place the subject itself to closer examination, still in light of the patterns of change as a consequence of diaspora. We turn to the texts in *What is African American Religion* (Pinn, 2011). This modest, but concise volume offers the reader an overview of the purpose of African American religion. The elements that build the religious experience, such as the *body* and the relationship between the body and society. This text also alerts readers to problematic assumptions we might make regarding this subject, since our frame of reference might not be complete. Pinn (2011) offers a critique of the understanding of the African American "cultural memory" regarding religion. This understanding may fall short because, traditionally, there was no account for what we cannot know, or "gaps of knowledge" (Pinn, 2011:50). Any study of African American religion should remain aware of the notion that "in our understanding of black life (…) the available sources do not reveal everything we want to know" (Pinn, 2011:50). And it is this notion that we take with us to gain insight on the permeation of the secular within the Black religious experience.

7.1 Patterns of change: re-spatialization

Firstly, regarding the purpose of African American religion. Confronted with the exclusionary effects of "otherness" (Pinn, 2011:18), a result of the realities of life in a slave society, the enslaved were in search of a "creative response" (Pinn, 2011:19) to their living conditions and ways to regain "a sense of their humanity" (Pinn, 2011:18). Religion became a vehicle for survival and the church a place to express themselves (Pinn, 2011:23). Within the Black church community, it was possible to *elevate* the function of one's own *body* – up from an impersonal, economic value to a spiritual value – in touch with God and as a vessel for the divine (Pinn, 2011:26). Pinn (2011, 55) understands the (Black) body as "constructed", taking on the meaning the outside world may give, and "lived", experiencing reality and placed in a present, with a history. In various texts the "fixed" nature of the construct of the Black body is stressed, for example in the "ways in which society seeks to essentialize the black body as representative of a restricted existence." (Pinn, 2011:56).

In trying to counter this oppression, the Black body sought to rise up and out of this confined space. At this point we can begin to recognize the transformative potential of religion in a diasporic context, specific to the circumstances of enslaved African Americans and their descendants. It was not "just" the impact of being part of a diaspora, but rather the consequences of *displacement* and lack of absorption in a new society that did not have a place for the African American as fellow humans. Faced with the dehumanizing treatment of the Black body followed by legitimized violence and exclusion through the legal system, the community sought new ways to maintain a sense of humanity through religion:

> With this in mind, African American religion could be understood to entail an effort to move beyond this exchange, beyond the pressures and restrictions of the social system. (…) I argue for dissonance between the social body and black bodies, a discord that sparks and fuels religion as historical liberation because the former operates through a process of bad faith and with corrupt intentions.
>
> (Pinn, 2011:57)

Pinn argues that, through the liberation of the personal body, a forward movement or transformation within the social could be aspired through religion (Pinn, 2011:57). Using whichever limited means available, the enslaved and their descendants sought to shape a parallel society. The one possibility there was to organize gatherings, was through faith and worship. This parallel society stood at the beginning of the Black culture and offered the safety and possibility to aspire to a better life – whether in this life or after death. In light of society's view regarding the emancipation of the enslaved, this radical notion was best expressed within the closed circle of the congregation. These aspirations manifested on at least two different levels; the liberation of the community through the formation of an alternative *space*, and the more personal freedom to express yourself as an individual. Either within the confines of this *space*, but ultimately also outside, in the larger society. One dimension of African American religion can be categorized as: "(…) the importance of an understanding of religion as historical manifestation of a struggle for transformation embedded in culture." (Pinn, 2011:61). The other dimension being the energy that fuels African American religion: "(…) a yearning for more life meaning – that informs, defines and shapes religious institutions, doctrines, and practices. (…) *the quest for complex subjectivity*." (Pinn, 2011:62)

7.2 Patterns of change: religion vs. culture

It can be posed that the starting point, or base, for the Black religious experience may stem from the “historical struggle for life meaning, with liberation as its goal” (Pinn, 2011, 40). Pinn further states that this singular definition does not do justice to the variety of traditions and “modalities of experience" (Pinn, 2011: 41) that are presented in the lives of African Americans. Injecting the ideas of Taylor might be productive at this stage; after describing the ascent and evolution of the Black religious experience. We *borrow* one statement regarding "fullness", that can be equated to the relentless (and essentially humanist) quest for complex subjectivity of the enslaved and their descendants. Viewing the secular age from a *social distance*, there has been a similar, but parallel process within the African American community committed to creating circumstances "in which this life looks good, whole, proper, really being lived as it should" (Taylor, 2007:600).

But, in line with the theory posed by Vertovec (2004), the emergence of Black humanism shows us the struggle between religious expression (as a given part of identity) and the emergence of a distinctive diasporic culture (which seeks room for the secular) . It can be found that communities in diaspora tend to bring religious elements “down” to the material world (Vertovec, 2004:21). The importance and strength of community (which can be found in regular diasporic communities), was enlarged by the historically constructed position of African Americans. Combined with the confines of the “fixed identity” of the Black body – it might not be an easy option to effectively separate religion and culture, since they have historically been intertwined. Instead, the African American sought out religious expressions that permitted the attainment of “secular” ambitions. Growth and development not solely to the glory of God, but to achieve the “fullness” of life here on earth.

Through the detachment of the external gaze by the holder of the body it is possible to make way for the needs of the soul. There is the opportunity to disengage from the fixed identity – initially through religion, but still following a continued evolution towards the realization of human possibilities. Here there is the chance to break free from the oppressive and inflexible dehumanizing *image* of the Black body by taking (or rather, seeking) liberties to define oneself as a “complex conveyor of cultural meaning” (Pinn, 2011: 63). There is a creation of culture that might originate from religion, but that is allowed to be in tension with the Christian expression of religious experience. The religious has not lost all value, but continues to exist in addition to the evolving culture.

7.3 Uncovering unseen influences

Taken out of the context of art, I attempt to move forward in identifying “opaque influences” (Pinn, 2011:86) (that have always been there but are not easily seen). Creating as it were, a new way to look at religion and the secular, fitting the lived experience of the African American – inspiring critical inspection of the position of other (non)theists that find themselves part of a diaspora. Starting from the “movement away from dehumanization” (Pinn, 2011:90), the scope of liberation has always been wider than the individual. Apart from this broad spatial horizon (extending to the community and society), there is also a broad temporal range, which Pinn refers to as the “*ethics of perpetual rebellion*” (Pinn, 2011:90). In line with the foundational (or elemental) need for “fullness”, it is more about the “process of struggle for something more” (Pinn, 2011:91).

> Through this process at its best, we chip away at the structures of dehumanization and in their place foster the formation of transformative possibilities.
> (Pinn, 2011:91)

This element of *transformation* remains at the heart of the Black religious experience. It is what inspired the enslaved Africans from the first moments they set foot in the “New World” and continues to inspire Black humanism as we see it today. Religion is, in a sense, still a means to strive for the creation of better lives for the individual and with that a better world that is attainable for all of humanity. In the context of this chapter, we revisit Pinn’s earlier definition of the Black religious experience:

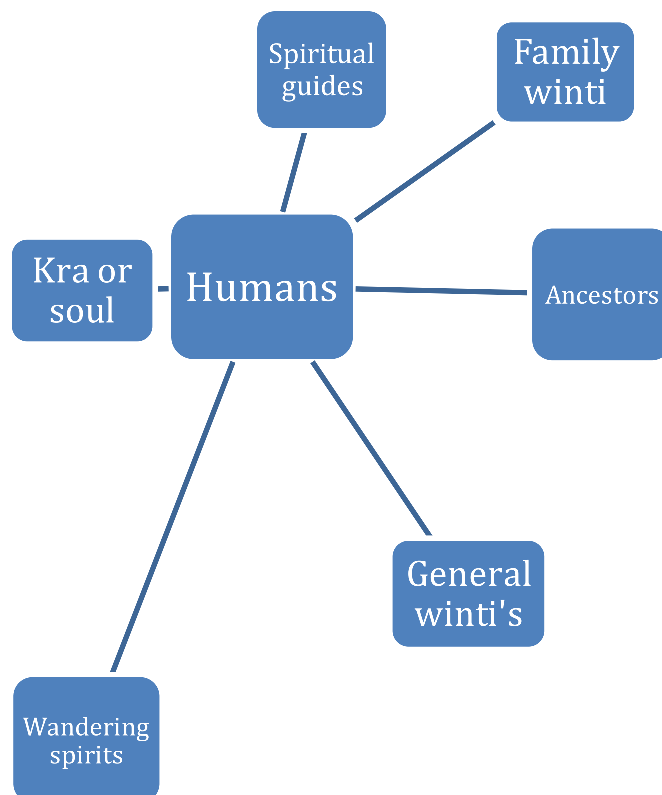
> I would like to define religious experience, in the context of black America, as the recognition of and response to the elemental feeling for complex subjectivity and the accompanying transformation of consciousness that allows for the historically manifest battle against the terror of fixed identity.
> (Pinn, 2011:95)

Reviewing the Black religious experience, we now see how separation from the religious may place pressure on the context, culture and identity from the perspective of African Americans. Taking note of the fluidity of the sacred and the secular within the Black religious experience, there have been theist and nontheist ways to engage in this battle.

Yet at the same time, this battle has historically confronted notions of the place of God in relation to humanity through the existence of Black humanism. The same pressure that caused the Anansesem folk tales to transform and secularize to better reflect the lived experience of the enslaved, the Black religious experience also sought to *draw the religious experience in* to speak to the context of the realities of Black life in the United States. This pressure towards transformation can be seen as formative to the Black religious experience after the diaspora.

8 Black humanism

As an inspiring example from Surinamese culture, I add an adaptation of a diagram presented in the book *Winti, Afro-Surinamese religion and magical rituals in Suriname and the Netherlands* (title translated from Dutch to English) by Henri Stephen (1985). A rather large part of the book is dedicated to *winti* (or wind), the name Surinamese creoles gave to their gods (Stephen, 1985:28), influenced by the religious experience the enslaved took with them during the Middle Passage (Stephen, 1985:28-29).



The caption reads as follows (translated from the original Dutch text):

> In this diagram of forces, humans take centre stage and are situated within the religious experience of winti. All groups shown have their own significance and meaning. They are drawn at varying distances to humans to reflect their degree of importance. (Stephen, 1985:31)

The concept of winti also extends to one's soul, or kra and one's ancestors. In that sense the gods – or winti's - are part of the person and can react to the way a person acts in life. The most important aspect of the winti religion is to live in harmony with other humans, nature and the gods. It would go too far for this thesis to further elaborate, but the example is quite powerful. The seeds of what we now call Black humanism might have travelled through space and time, carefully cultivated, so that they may bear fruit whenever the time was right. The previous diagram serves as an illustration of a pre-diasporic element that has shaped the religious experience of a similar demographic. If this is present in Suriname as a former slave society, there might also be many traces of the past lingering in the Black religious experience found in the United States. It might be interesting to uncover their existence through the assessment of the appearance of Black humanism in the United States.

After reviewing the formation and appearance of the Black religious experience, we turn the focus to Black humanism. Previous chapters showed traces of humanistic thought within a seemingly theist religious experience. The next chapter focuses on sub question four: "What is the current state of Black humanism in the United States, what are its foundations and in what way does it relate to Western humanist thought?". Getting to know the form and function of Black humanism puts us another step closer to answering the main research question and helps us gain insight into the association between religion and secularity.

8.1 Discovering Black humanism

The discrepancy between the real-world experience of the African American and the theoretical promise posed through Christian religion inspired an interpretation of religiosity that eventually became recognized as Black humanism. Pinn states that there has always been humanist thought within the African American community. We are presented with a concise premise on Black humanism:

> Black humanism, as found in Black oral tradition and later, Black literature, denies the existence of God and holds humans fully accountable for the existence and removal of moral evil in the world.
>
> (Pinn, 1995:11)

The existence of Black humanism was however not always recognized as such. Pinn refers to Black humanism as a "forgotten component" of the Black religious tradition (Pinn, 1995:11).

This chapter reviews the development of what can be termed a form of *parallel secularization*. The secular within the African American community had different roots and bore different fruits. Before identifying the specifics of Black humanism, it is interesting to view the context of humanism in the broader society within the United States. A paragraph in *Varieties of African American Religion* (1998) is dedicated to this subject. Pinn describes the tension there has always been between the nation, that was seemingly built on humanist principles, and the "discomfort with freethinkers" (Pinn, 1998:157).

8.2 The contours of Black humanism

This view of the nontheist individual as a threat to the security and welfare of this new nation (Pinn, 1998:160, Pinn, 2017:112) was deeply entrenched in society since its inception. Christianity was far too important in the lives of many Americans, but eventually the call for a more rational interpretation of the bible ensued (Pinn, 1998:158). However, the American humanist could not simply denounce God - it was necessary to live *around* God (Pinn,1998:158-159). With this position in mind – the seeds of religious diversity were sown. The early humanists in America were not antireligious, like their European counterparts (Pinn, 1998:156), but instead applied theology as a guide to investigate the state of the personal and social life in order to aid social change (Pinn, 1998:159). Referencing Unitarianism, we again see the personal intertwined with a concern for social advancement, just as we could see in the formation of Black religion. The thought that binds them is that it was up to humans "to develop ways by which life could be lived and lived well." (Pinn, 1998:160). We as humans were responsible for the way we made society work.

As mentioned before, the fuel for humanist thought within the African American society was completely different from the European frame of mind. Not based on challenges to the church or questions of morality, but instead "on the hypocrisy of nominally Christian slave owners" (Pinn, 1998:161) and a lack of a *present* God in lived experience. But even after this discovery, many African Americans found that they could not fully separate from God. The only option was to form a "truce with the notion of God" (Pinn, 1998:165). This was true for the African American humanist and the American humanist alike, albeit that the African American humanist found themselves bound to the Black community by the way society was shaped. If one wanted to stay a part of the community and the culture – it was necessary to live among active believers even if the individual had chosen to reject God (Pinn, 1998:165-166).

Lacking the opportunities for connections with society, the nontheist Black humanists found themselves in search of new communities (Pinn, 1998:167). These could be found within academic circles or those of political parties (Pinn, 1998:167). They formed alternative organizations in which African Americans were able to come together and critically view the role of the African American church in light of social injustice (Pinn, 1998:169). Again, we see an example of the connection between the beliefs of the individual in relation to the state of the social environment. However strong the "pull" from the Christian church might be, texts by early Black humanists show us that disbelief did not have the same sources as we have come to connect to the secular as we have known the concept in the "classical" sense. Pinn's analysis of the autobiography of James Forman shows a type of secular humanism intrinsically motivated by the wish for social transformation:

> Forman did not reach this conclusion because God had not responded to his petitions; rather, his conclusion was based upon the historical condition and needs of a large community. His rejection of God was not a surrender to absurdity but a call to arms. For him humanism required a strong commitment on the part of people to change their present condition. (Pinn, 1998:172)

8.3 Expressions of Black humanism

With the grounds for humanism fundamentally different, there are also other options open to these humanists. The question if God exists is not relevant, since there is always some "evidence of divine activity" (Pinn, 1995:141). For some humanists, there can still be a dialogue with God, presented in the existence of "soft humanism" (Pinn, 1998:175). On the other hand, not everything can be a result of God's work *alone*. Humans and God work together to shape our conditions (Pinn, 1995:141). Within the distinct features of Black humanism, the separation between humanism and atheism is not relevant - it is what they might share: "belief in the need for humans to act in responsible ways that do not assume the presence of a superhuman force"(Pinn, 1998:175). The more pressing issue presents itself in the realities of daily life:

> Furthermore, God's existence is not questioned because weak humanism seeks - in response to oppressive conditions - the increased status of Black humanity relative to that of white humans. The goal is to prevent the oppressed from underestimating their humanity. (Pinn, 1995:141)

Where improving the state of our world and the relative position of the African American is a goal of soft humanism, strong humanism takes the current state as an indication of the lack of the existence of a higher power (Pinn, 1995:141).

> For strong humanism, relatively sustained and oppressive world conditions bring into question the presence of any Being outside of the human realm. (...) Consequently, humanity has no one to turn for assistance.
> (Pinn, 1995:141)

This second view explicitly gives humanity full responsibility over the conditions we live in. Where soft humanism might have an emancipating function, strong humanism serves to empower and activate. With this assignment comes the awareness that counting on each other for the way forward will not always be easy and in addition to that also demands communion of different communities within society:

> Moral obligation and proper ethical conduct are not dictated by God but by a genuine concern with unified existence - ontological wholeness on the individual level and communal relationships. Achievement of this goal is not certain, however; humanity must work toward it nonetheless. There is intrinsic value in the effort itself.
> (Pinn, 1995:155)

8.4 Black humanism as opportunity for change

Theorizing a way out of the history of oppression was necessary for the African American to *rise up* from the assumption of "divine approval for suffering" (Pinn, 1995:157). The lived experience or realities need to be dealt with - by humanity itself:

> In removing even the most covert possibility of divine approval for suffering, strong humanism frees the oppressed to fight for social transformation. The importance of human struggle for change is highlighted and amplified by strong humanism because there are no external sources of assistance. Humanity has complete control over its destiny and therefore, one cannot hide behind God and plead that nonaction is a divine command.
> (Pinn, 1995:157)

We have turned to *Why, Lord?* (1995) in order to discuss the forms of Black humanism. "Classical" humanism inherited the problematic foundations of the Western secular society - due to disregarding the position of African Americans and not being able to address the issues and injustices surrounding the handling of racism (Pinn, 1995:140). Pinn proposed a bridge by which "humanist tradition seeks to intimately connect Black Americans to the larger web of human existence" (Pinn, 1995:140). More than 25 years after Pinn's initial proposal, we take a closer look at the advancement of the construction of said bridge. How does this affect the lived experience of the individual apostate and the African American community? The next chapter will explore what it may mean to be a Black humanist in the secular age.

9 African American apostates in the secular age

> We, in the end, might simply find our selves fully exposed, with what we once considered our substance stripped away, but through this process also is exposed alternative possibilities and an invitation for new ways to position the self. The cartography of this process might very well constitute the nature of the human emoting an unfulfilled (and perpetual) yearning for life meaning. Suggested by this is the human condition – the nature, meaning and resolve of the embodied self. (Pinn, 2012:63)

The previous chapters drew up the context of society in relation to the African American and alternative interpretations of classical understandings of the secular and humanism. After unearthing the foundations of the black religious experience and the contours of black humanism it is now time to view the religious experience of African American Nones. In this chapter we address the first part of the fifth sub question: "*What does it mean to be an African American apostate*, and does one give meaning to their lives?" The practical contours of the lived experience of an apostate determine the extent to which one is able to live a full life outside of the realms of the own community. In the next chapters the balance between society, the community and the individual is viewed from the focal point of the apostate.

9.1 The plurality of the religious Nones

In *Introducing African American Religion* (2013) Pinn sharpens the distinction as to what actually constitutes a religious None. This group is formed by "those who claim no particular affiliation with traditional theistic organizations, *some of whom are atheists*" (Pinn, 2013:236, emphasis mine). The religious None is also concerned with the infrastructure surrounding religion, primarily rejecting affiliation to institutionalized religion and "likely" to have nontheist views, but not automatically (Streib & Klein, 2013:2). This shows that the category of Nones in surveys might oversimplify the situation in the real world. This historical minority has always been less studied than their theist counterparts (Streib & Klein, 2013:2). However, this mysterious group of Nones has been growing steadily over the last decades (Pinn, 2013:236).

> Whether the term “religion” is used or not, these humanists/atheists outside traditional communities of belief still provide ways to address thought and action revolving around a desire to create greater life meaning.
>
> (Pinn, 2013:237)

But to discover the appearance and the particular “fostering of life meaning” (Pinn, 2013:236) among African American religious Nones, it is necessary to discuss nontheism as *formed by* theism (Pinn, 2013:236). This leaves the formation of the African American apostate rather complicated, due to the significance of the Black religious experience with a myriad of expressions, theist and nontheist. Streib & Klein (2013) suggest a method for investigating apostasy:

> We believe that a more dynamic approach is called for, one that views atheism and agnosticism as processes. From the perspective of a dynamic approach, it is also necessary to include apostasy in this discussion, because people who leave their faith are in the process of a developmental change, a migration in the religious field which may eventually lead to exiting the religious domain altogether. Therefore, the three terms in the title are interrelated and need to be studied in tandem.
>
> (Streib & Klein, 2013:2)

9.2 Rethinking secularization

Streib & Klein (2013) also take note of Charles Taylor, channeling his theory on “modern atheism (…) as a consequence of the Enlightenment and the ethical fight for freedom in matters of religion (…) in the 19th century” (Streib & Klein, 2013:4). This so-called “ethical fight for freedom in matters of religion” disregarded the plight of the African Americans regarding a free *life*. At the same time the United States presented a different interpretation of disbelief, with a rate of secularization that has been slower compared to that of European countries (Streib & Klein, 2013:8). The foundations of (a parallel) secularization within the African American community came to be in light of these circumstances. Keeping this in mind, it is interesting to view further general ideas on nontheism in the context of the African American. Next to the definitions of agnosticism and atheism presented by Streib & Klein (2013), we would be tempted to compare these respective positions to the soft and strong humanism as perceived by Pinn (1995) in the context of Black humanism. Both are centered around a “culturally dominant and specifically theistic image of God” (Streib & Klein, 2013:3).

But as mentioned earlier the Black humanist, like most humanists in the United States, will not so much engage in denial or opposition against God as their European counterparts. Atheism as a "hard core of anti-religious sentiment" (Streib & Klein, 2013:4) might not be easily found in the United States at all, since it can lead to being viewed as nonconformist (Streib & Klein, 2013:15). The African American in particular could not afford to be the *other* in a religious sense in addition to the racial *other*. Instead it may be more true to reality to lean towards various locations on a spectrum of nontheism (Pinn, 1995:19) where agnosticism is classified as "a rather mild position of religious abstinence" (Streib & Klein, 2013:4).

9.3 Apostasy and the religious community

Where atheism and agnosticism may look like private matters, the community comes into play when it comes to apostasy. Understanding "apostasy as disidentification and eventually disaffiliation from a religious tradition" (Streib & Klein, 2013:5), in practice it is believed to entail: "the loss of religious experiences, intellectual doubt and denial, moral criticism, and disaffiliation from a religious community" (Streib & Klein, 2013:5). While agnostic and atheistic thought can be found in the religious history of the African American, separation from community – in light of the hostility of the social system with regards to the Black body and the disdain for disbelief in the larger society– was (and sometimes is) not an attractive option. Any disbelief had to remain under the social radar and within the confines of the community, which makes it more difficult to recognize. The ever-present undercurrent of Black humanism within the Black religious experience can be seen as integrated in the religious experience of the community. Defining the apostate as an individual actively distancing themselves from the religious community, carries a different weight when applied to the African American living in the United States (Pinn, 2013:239).

Streib & Klein (2013) also point us to a general problematic surrounding our definitions of religious Nones: "atheism, agnosticism and apostasy must not be lumped together with the unspecified group of the unaffiliated or "nones" – who might include non-attending believers and private practitioners who still feel attached to their (former) religious traditions" (Streib & Klein, 2013:5). This also seems appropriate in relation to the circumstances of the African American None, seeing the diversity of expression within the Black religious experience as a whole. In the end, the question remains whose interest is served by reproducing or perpetuating the theist/nontheist dichotomy, especially when these might not do justice to the richness of interpretations given to the meaning of life between these "categories" of nontheism.

Pinn proposes to put the *objectives* central to the religious experience. When religion in the broadest sense of the word – for the African American - can be viewed as a way to aspire and *be* in a mostly hostile or unpredictable environment, it appeared to be one of the few ways to fully engage with the world and also to fully express themselves as a person. Given the historically segregated society in the United States, social activity for the African American in most cases meant the church community was the only available or accessible space.

9.4 Rethinking nontheism

There have however been humanist organizations that have opened their doors to the African American with nontheist views (Pinn, 2013:239-240). Challenges faced by these organizations were presented in the form of "increasing the number of members" (Pinn, 2013:240), for which they have adopted diversity as a starting point (Pinn, 2013:240,242). African American humanists also sought to organize themselves, since "one's racial background is understood and (is to be) embraced as intimately connected to one's atheism" (Pinn, 2013:242). One has been shaped by the other. It is, however, still a precarious position to take, given the "isolation that can result from public pronouncement of non-theism by African Americans" (Pinn, 2013:243). This position of having two distinctive positions as the *other* is described by Pinn as being part of a "minority community (…) as a minority (…)" (Pinn, 2013:243). In that sense, there is still work to be done to normalize and gain acceptance for the African American (that aspires to live life as an) apostate.

In conclusion, just like the secular (in a Western sense of the word) cannot be imposed on the religious experience of the African American, concepts like atheism, agnosticism and apostasy behave differently according to the history and social context of the African American. This context, history and culture prevent the full application of this theory on this specific demographic. The Black religious experience was not so much inspired by the secular as a *product of modernity and the Enlightenment*, but much more *pressurized into formation* because of the philosophical foundations of the secular and its *silence* when it comes to race. In previous chapters it was also noted that the spiritual foundation of the enslaved was quite different from that of the European settlers that colonized the United States. After introducing Christianity to the enslaved, the creation and enforcing of the racial divide *by means of the Christian faith,* gave the enslaved no other choice but to adapt the scripture in a way that gave meaning to their lives.

These adaptations of Christianity lived next to African religious experiences that were handed down by the enslaved and transformed during the centuries. The subsequent emergence of Black humanism and the current lived experience of the African American apostate are all products of this original silence.

9.5 Opening secular spaces

For the African American the challenge to the secular age exists on different levels; first in its formation – before the displacement and after in its (dis-)service to the African American population during the period of enslavement. Secondly, the tension between theism and nontheism grew when religion took on new meaning – as a tool for liberation - and became formative in terms of the African American identity. Even though it has not been *the same* secular age for all, the Black religious experience came to encompass theist and nontheist views, not just in response to an unresponsive God, but in response to an unresponsive *society*. Understanding how religion (during the secular age) was experienced by the descendants of the enslaved helps us understand that we teach ourselves to privilege one theory regarding the form and function of religion and the secular *at the cost* of gaining understanding of other interpretations of how our world might function.

Humanist organizations nowadays make room for a diverse group of humanists, but humanism as a philosophy of life does not yet offer strong communal bonds or social networks for the African American apostate. Following the "law" of individuality – life for the single Black apostate in a white society can be rather lonely. For a long time, African American religion was almost the only way to really come into existence as a full human being. The position on the spectrum of theism might have changed over time, but the desire to express oneself and be *seen*, is deemed to be universal. It might be time to reflect on the previous chapters and see where it leaves us humanists in the real world. The next chapter will explore how such a connection can be made and what it effectively means to take in all forms of human existence into a new and inclusive humanist orientation.

10 The Black religious experience x humanism

The next chapter focuses on the second part of the fifth sub question: "What does it mean to be an African American apostate*, and does one give meaning to their lives*?" Here we see an assignment to take in the Black humanist experience within the broader framework of humanist thought and humanism.

> I told y'all, and now I'm on
> you thought it was over, you thought I was gone
> I'm goin' in, you don't have to let me, have to let me
> back from the dead like I'm Makaveli, Makaveli
> (Najm, F.R, 2010:2:50)

In a way this thesis tries to match the bold arrival as worded by hip-hop artist Faheem Rashad Najm (also known as T-Pain) in the song Black & Yellow. It is no longer necessary to await the invitation to the party. He will be part – and will be stepping in (-to the imaginary). The last lines might be interpreted as stepping out of the darkness of the "social death" (Pinn, 2011:13) of the Black body that accompanied the first arrival of the African American in the United States.

10.1 Hidden humanism

For the African American, and its long history of (humanistic) religious expression, have never truly been dead:

> African Americans have been doing humanism for a long time, for as long as there has been a nation in which to do it.
> (Pinn, 2017:53)

It was perhaps a *hidden humanism,* constructed with a means of relating to (being in this) world (Pinn, 2017:57) without the focus on the "heady dimensions of humanism" (Pinn, 2017:58). Black humanism relied on the knowledge – or lived experience – that it is only humans that can make a difference in our lives (Pinn, 2017:58). The effect of this prolonged life on the edge of the secular imaginary, first of the enslaved Africans, then of the socially marginalized African Americans, might have been a test of creativity and adaptivity in order to ensure survival. Now that the times are changing – it is time to take a seat at the table.

After exploring the emergence of Black humanism and what can be named the parallel secularization within the Black community, the difficulties posed for African American apostates within the larger society, it is time to search for connections and change our perspective (Pinn, 2017:58). The reason why Black humanism has existed under the radar is thought to be a question of "historical shortsightedness" (Pinn, 2017:64) among white humanists.

10.2 Broadening perspectives

As a way forward Pinn (2017) proposes the following:

> (…) Organizations wanting to reenvision their membership do well to recognize this and attempt to learn these codes and grammars by first paying attention to histories other than their own.
>
> (Pinn, 2017:64-65)

These histories, are again a starting point for the positions we find ourselves in now. Historically in the United States, difference (and the mechanisms of exclusion that they have created) exist together with an underlying "motif" where difference is stated as a problem to be solved (Pinn, 2017:107). Aside from the issues around racism, in the United States, "sameness" has historically been privileged as a means of transforming a diverse population to a "unified" population (Pinn, 2017:108). These thoughts around "difference, sameness, conformity and unity" (Pinn, 2017:108) are still present, even in in humanist circles (Pinn, 2017:115). Adhering to this train of thought leads to the suppression of difference and the privilege of whiteness (Pinn, 2017:115). Here we can discern the problematic for the meeting of the Black religious experience and the "classical" humanist. Pinn gives a number of options to facilitate this meeting, starting with the rethinking of the old views of "safety in sameness and threat in difference" (Pinn, 2017:117) and challenges us to re-evaluate these concepts. Rethinking the value of difference can be of great benefit:

> So, I prefer to think of difference as an opportunity, as a chance to add complexity to community and to learn from approaches and perspectives outside of what is considered normative.
>
> (Pinn, 2017:120)

The proposed solution towards the new humanist perspective can be summarized as a need for "classical" humanists to speak truth to the way life is experienced and that shares a vision of the future that can be applied to *all* people (Pinn, 2017:130.

Inspired by hip hop culture Pinn describes this as follows: “substantive diversity requires production of an organic system of symbols and signs” (Pinn, 2017:130). By co-creating language for a truly open “system”, this system becomes a place where it is possible to see oneself as genuinely connected. Not merely as members, but as constituents. As a result of the lack of knowledge regarding the history of African Americans, humanist organizations cannot offer an alternative to the sense of community and opportunities offered by the Black church (Pinn, 2017:130-131).

The next issue lies in the attention given to “the significance, the invaluable importance of the mundane and the ordinary” (Pinn, 2017:132). It is there where most dilemmas or challenges exist. Not specifically in the greater life changing moments, but rather in embodied everyday life (Pinn, 2017:132). Furthermore, Pinn touches on the *colorblindness* that many propagate when it comes to race. It is problematic in that in it erases a crucial part of someone’s identity. Granted, there might not be a “fixed identity” in the sense of the dehumanized Black body as we saw in earlier times, but dismissing race as a whole also negates any expression of complex subjectivity of the contemporary Black body. Propagating that race does not exist for *you*, implies it does not have to be dealt with. Aside from the problematic effect on the individual *other*, this is also a missed opportunity to see “difference not as a dilemma to solve, but as a benefit” (Pinn, 2017:133. A final issue to deal with according to Pinn is the acceptance that this might form a challenging start, but there is great meaning in the process:

> “(…) human relationships (with self, others and the world) are messy, inconsistent, and thick with desires, contradictions, motives and hopeful hopelessness.
> (Pinn, 2017:133)

This tells us it will not be easy, but it might be the only way to grow towards an inclusive and welcoming humanism. Giving meaning to one’s life starts with the individual, but is ultimately also a question of the ability to relate to others in a meaningful way. Correcting the narrative surrounding difference – also within humanist circles – might be a good way to start.

11 Conclusion

The least I can say
I anticipate
a homecoming parade as we renegade
in the morning, right on
(The Black Pumas, 2019:2:31)

With these hopeful words from the song “Colors” by The Black Pumas we come to a conclusion. In this song, the start of a new day is celebrated. It marks the start of a journey together, where all are invited to bring themselves and show their authentic colors so they can be seen for who they truly are. We again look upon the main research question posed at the beginning: “How can Anthony B. Pinn’s work on Black humanism contribute to understanding the tensions between religion and secularity among apostatic African Americans?” We applied the work of Anthony Pinn to gain better understanding of the religious context of the African American. Starting from the question that is too often asked (Pinn, 2017): what keeps racial minorities bound to theist religion? It appears that the (Western) opposition between the sacred and the secular is not in line with the lived experience of the African American. This thesis examined the nature of the Black religious experience as a "quest for complex subjectivity" stemming from life in an oppressive environment and the broken promises Christianity offered. The tension between religion and secularity takes a different shape within this community, because of the historical and social context of the African American. It does not follow patterns that can be expected when viewed from the frame of reference offered by Western philosophies on religion and the secular (first sub question: “How does Charles Taylor’s philosophical analysis of the secular age contribute to understanding the tensions between the Black religious experience and secularity?”).

It is distinctly different from the experience of the white European settlers and has origins that can be traced back to the period surrounding the Middle Passage and displacement of the enslaved Africans. The enslaved Africans brought with them a belief system based on harmony and community, only to be confronted with a cruel society built around dehumanizing the Black body. A spectrum of religious expression formed in response to these circumstances (sub question two: “What is the impact of the diaspora on the Black religious experience?”).

Encompassing a broad diversity of religiosity, from traditional to original expressions of faith, Black religion was shaped to meet the unique circumstances of the African American. Ranging from theist interpretations of liberation to human-centered nontheist culture. Simultaneous to the secular age as we have come to know it, a budding Black humanism came forth (sub question three: “What defines the Black religious experience after the diaspora?”).

This nontheist or humanistic culture knew its foundations in pre-diasporic elements in West-Africa and were incorporated into the reality of the slave society. These small sprouts grew more and spread out over time. In part they grew with the attention that was given, in part perhaps because of the increased secularization of the United States. Nowadays Black humanism is emerging from the cocoon of Black religion as a steadily growing alternative (sub question four: “What is the current state of Black humanism in the United States, what are its foundations and in what way does it relate to Western humanist thought?”).

This growth is complicated by the lack of connection to the experience of the African American offered by “classical” humanism. Partly by not acknowledging the history of the secular in relation to race and not being open to these Black perspectives of humanistic thought. Unexamined assumptions regarding issues of race effect classical humanist views of the African American religious experience. If religion, in the context of diaspora or displacement, indeed has the potential to be transformative, *giving up* on religion can – for the African American – mean detaching from community and in a sense, giving up on the potential to build a lasting change in circumstances with your community. For the individual, for the community and for the larger society. (sub question five: “What does it mean to be an African American apostate, and does one give meaning to their lives?”).

The assignment for us as humanist professionals is to create a more open secular space; one that takes the historical and cultural background of all types of freethinkers into account, in order to relate to each other fully and exchange inspiration for living a good life (sub question six: “How can humanist chaplains attempt to support the individual by gaining understanding of the tension between religion and secularity?”, addressed in chapter 12).

We should ask ourselves: “What does it mean to live encapsulated in the secular age – when it's very basic premise of ultimate human possibility might not apply to you?”.
We should aspire to be renegades regarding conventional knowledge; challenging our own assumptions and understanding of the role of religion in relation to the secular. Only by taking on this new perspective, can we stand side by side with freethinkers not yet connected to classical humanist networks.

Now, the time has come to look back in order to move forward. It is time to embrace new definitions of the secular, through a better understanding of the role of religion and acknowledging the exclusionary character of our classical view of the secular. By broadening our theoretical horizon, critically reflecting upon and decolonizing our sources, humanism can work to become an inclusive and welcoming philosophy of life. New perspectives can help us commit to engaging all freethinking humans in their endeavor to add meaning, value and fullness to our lives. As long as humanists cannot fully acknowledge and embrace the yearning for the expression of complex subjectivity felt by African Americans (or any other community), distances will prove to be difficult to bridge. The discussion will formulate alternatives regarding the sixth sub question: “How can humanist chaplains attempt to support the individual by gaining understanding of the tension between religion and secularity?”
I will make some suggestions for further research and offer ways to engage with this matter for the humanist institutions closest to me; the University of Humanistic Studies and the Dutch Humanist Association drawing on lessons I have taken from the process of writing this thesis and my personal experience.

As an outsider looking into African American history and religion, I believe the insights are relevant for the lives of many more cultural minorities that live *embedded* in the secular West. It can be argued that this phenomenon occurs wherever there is “othering”. Such as with migrant minority populations in Europe or the Netherlands. And even though I am not African American myself, I too am – in fact – African before I am anything else.

12 Discussion

In the process of this thesis it was possible to bring forth previously less noticed influences, but there are still questions unanswered. This is especially tragic seeing the impact our histories have on our lived experience as individuals and the opportunities we have within our lives to (as we all aspire) lead rich and fulfilling lives. The effects of which can be seen in the example of the modern-day Christian apostate with African ancestors. Looking back there are also a few limitations to the thesis that can be discussed. Since I have not conducted any interviews, the knowledge has been reconstructed on the shoulders of others. Considering the fluid nature of religion (in diaspora) it would be recommended to keep connecting with communities and individuals going forward. Dilemmas might shift appearance and needs might change. Furthermore, the focus has been on the Black religious experience coming from African Americans with a Christian background. There are of course many other religious beliefs within the African American community, for instance African American Muslims. This community also harbors theists and emerging nontheists that might appear to have similar experiences, but their experiences should be viewed as a markedly different manifestation of diasporic religious experience in relation to the dynamics of the Christian society they are a part of.

12.1 Expanding knowledge

Since knowledge regarding the transformation of society as a result of our colonial histories has not long been part of the mainstream, this is often seen as “specialized knowledge” which stands in opposition of many “general” topics. In more and more areas it becomes clear that our definitions and conceptualization of the world needs to be decolonized. The knowledge we do have remains fragmented or introduced as part of a specific theoretical lens. As a result, many of these effects remain underexposed.
I have made an attempt to find relevant literature, and there are many more scholars engaging in this debate. In 2017, Leatt already wrote:

> The colonial stories of secularism are not marginal, either historically or in the present. And they are largely missing from the academic study of secularism.
>
> (Leatt, 2017:22)

The critique on the universality of Western philosophies regarding religion and the secular has however remained scattered, and has not yet permeated religious, secular and humanist

thought. Categorizing a focus on race and slavery as controversial, unnecessary or "something of the past", blinds us to all sorts of phenomena that influence our lives to this day.

It is my hope that - in time - it will no longer be *niche* to concern oneself with the aftermath of coloniality. Only when it becomes *natural* to account for race, more unified theories can be redesigned. Fortunately, the academic lens is widening, with more and more academics critically reviewing the legacy the Enlightenment has left us. There are other academic projects underway that raise questions regarding the philosophical foundations of Western thought and the influence on our society to this day. In the final weeks of my research I came across a project led by Dr. Dorothea Gädeke at Utrecht University[16].

The project *Theorizing freedom from below* deals with the fallout of our privileged concept of freedom that was developed by the minds of free men, who employed the concept of slavery as a metaphor. A theorized reality that disregarded many.

What did these definitions of freedom mean for those that lived in slavery as contemporaries? By having "glanced over" these differences within society in the past, are we reproducing the same blind spots? It would be my recommendation to direct further research towards reviewing our concepts of the secular, religion and religious experience as part of an inheritance we are still uncovering.

At the same time, it might also be interesting to view the impact living in a slave society might have had on the religious experience of the majority? As discussed, the settlers and migrants that populated the United States from a wide range of European countries, all brought their own religious backgrounds. At the same time, they also had a diasporic experience. Like African Americans, it was often influenced by (economically motivated) displacement. Taking note of the role of scripture and religion within the United States and the foundations of the slave society, sources show us that the Christian religion was employed to justify the division between the races. What were (historic) consequences for white apostates regarding one's identity, culture or "place" in society? Even though there has been research into the religious experience of religious Irish and Italian migrants, it might have never been popular to answer this question while making the influence of living in a segregated society a focal point when studying religiosity.

[16] https://www.uu.nl/nieuws/uya-lid-dorothea-gadeke-ontvangt-een-vidi-beurs-van-800000-euro

12.2 Scientific implications

The theory posed by Pinn to embrace humanism as a nontheist religion gives us the opportunity to engage with the transformative force of religion. By shedding the paradigms originating from a world that did not account for race, we can see ourselves expanding our knowledge regarding theories that shaped our world today. The natural sciences are driven forward by a hunger for knowledge and allow for a lively scientific discussion whenever new discoveries render earlier laws obsolete. Incorporating "new insights" in critically reviewing our curriculum might offer humanists inspiration and opportunities to discover common ground where it was not sought out before. It is not my intention to start a philosophical discussion on the development of the social sciences – that would comprise a different thesis altogether. But Humanistic Studies, as an interdisciplinary field, concerned with the development of humanity and the ways to live a good life, can certainly break ground by decolonizing our philosophies and actively accounting for *race*. By acknowledging the flaws in the knowledge we choose to reproduce and critically assess the lens we apply to our world, we can discern the ways in which the status quo does not do justice to the entirety of the human experience. Our next step can be to truly embrace all of humanity as humanists.

As was uncovered in this thesis, there has always been an “undercurrent of disbelief” (Pinn, 2017:53) within the African American community. Connecting this current to the “mainstream” of Western humanist thought has not been a given. And this is the risk we take by using certain theories as normative, when religious experience, like many phenomena are better viewed within its historical and social context. It might be safe to assume that secular or even humanistic thought was part of the African religious experience the enslaved brought with them. The secular (as Western humanists have come to know it) has not yet incorporated these views on the position and agency of humans in relation to life on this earth.

The lessons taken from the religious experience and the form and function of religiosity and the secular through the displacement of the enslaved Africans can be put to the benefit of societies in Europe as well. As a consequence of the hegemony of the Eurocentric discourse on modernity and religion, there has been “An overwhelming preoccupation with secularization as the dominant paradigm in the sociology of religion” (Davie, 2010:162). This view does not help in understanding the role religion has for the majority of people (Davie, 2010:162). We have almost dismissed the influence of religion continues to play within individual and social lives around the globe (Davie, 2010: 160).

This is also presented for the United States; namely that the sources and process of secularization and the essence of "the relationship between religion and modernity" (Davie, 2010:163) take entirely different forms when one shifts the attention away from Europe.

It is my dream that – just as any academic in physics – the humanistic academic will also strive for scientific progress regarding the ways we give meaning to and value the human lived experience. It is no longer feasible to assume the universal value of concepts and view the secular and modernity *as we have come to known it* as normative. And as Davie notes the problematic views of religion within European society (Davie, 2010:164), it becomes clear that a new perspective, acceptance and authentic curiosity for religion can present a constructive way forward. This becomes increasingly urgent seeing the formation of European nations as migrant societies, drawing attention to the difficulties of integrating these newer "faith communities" into larger society (Davie, 2010:173). These movements bring a diversity of religious experience to the European landscape and migrants – and we risk further disconnection within society if we disregard the notion to invest in speaking languages that were not designed by our privileged (or preferred) frameworks.

The way out may firstly be in a commitment to rethinking what we know about religion and the secular, for instance via our humanistic canon. And in a literal sense: challenging our secular age. What does the secular age *really* mean to whom and how can we define the secular more realistically to give meaning to existing tensions between theism and nontheism. Secondly, committing to understanding what it means to have adhered to these theories that privileged hegemonic power to the detriment of minorities. What have we missed and what might need correction? If we continue to define the religious and the secular *as we have done until now*, we dismiss "centuries-old patterns of nontheistic thinking and doing" (Pinn, 2017:64). In line with the theory on religion in diaspora, we must also learn to deal with the various starting points and meanings of religiosity within migrant communities. In addition to that; seeing the transformative potential of diaspora in regards to religion, we have to be able to acknowledge that religious expression can be an element of identity. When a member of a traditionally religious community becomes part of a secular society (for instance in the Netherlands), a form of secularization may take place, but it is also seen that the religious community gains importance (Van Tubergen, 2007:762). Apart from the influence of the level of secularization in the homeland (Van Tubergen, 2010: 763), a new – distinctive – expression of diasporic religion emerges within communities, the outcomes of which can be seen as highly dependent on the level of assimilation in the hostland.

12.3 Implications for the humanistic chaplain

If we as professionals wish to be of service to humanity, we must be willing and able to see all of humanity for who they truly are. In the end, the religious and the secular are expressions of identity (of the self) and culture (of the community) in response to society. It helps to be mindful of the – as yet – underexposed influences of the society as a system on the exact mappings of the secular landscape. Especially when looking at expressions of faith or repression of the secular within religious communities. The *attraction* theism seems to offer may less be an effect of the piety of the individual, but rather a side-effect of the external (social) pressures faced by the community that place limitations or restrictions on the freethinking individual.

Even though the West might have abandoned the connection between religion and identity, this does not mean that this is a lived experience for all – especially not for anyone in a minority position within a larger society. Your identity may be formed *for* you, and with that your networks and your mobility: creating spaces where you *get* to thrive or flourish that might not be of your own choosing.

As humanist chaplains are confronted with a wide range of clients with a theist background, it helps if there can be a higher level of awareness regarding the origins of these different beliefs. It is not the intention to create "super theologists", it would simply be adequate to understand where our (privileged) theoretical base comes from and in what instances it might be flawed. Opening up the definition of the secular – or what makes a "good" humanist - can be a good place to start. Further it is necessary to acknowledge that – living in Western-Europe and being educated by philosophies coming from this continent – also narrows definitions of the world that lead us to making risky assumptions about the state of the world, and in addition to that: the individual that presents itself before us. By doing so we deprive ourselves of valuable knowledge and the opportunity to connect outside of our own networks. So any knowledge of "the secular" has to be measured within context. Who is being regarded and what are the contours of their religious and social history?

The strength of community and the level of assimilation in the hostland might seem (to us) less relevant for the individual experience of the freethinker, but any early exploration towards the role of religion and the socially stressful experience of "coming out" as atheist or humanist in Black communities within the United States and the United Kingdom shows us otherwise. The ability to offer an open society that is able to incorporate perspectives offered by challenging the meanings assigned to Eurocentric norms, will bring opportunities for enhancing lives at a community level, but also for the freethinking individual.

These undervalued sources of humanistic thought can be a valuable addition to our philosophy of life. In this thesis, I have attempted to incorporate as many (not yet classical) perspectives of humanistic thought as I could. It would be commendable to start viewing migrant communities within their specific historical context and also extending an invitation to exchange values. Where can we meet each other and what makes us valuable parts of the same society? Not unlike quilts which can be expanded, seemingly limitless to enable future growth and the incorporation of new additions. Also produced by humanity, we can choose to enrich the fabric of society by acknowledging a diversity of colors and patterns.

13 Epilogue

For all my previous essays and papers at the University of Humanistic Studies I have made a point of incorporating contemporary music that has served as an inspiration for my work. For the epilogue I would like to share a few lyrics penned down by rapper Glenn de Randamie in 2005. Under his stage name, Typhoon he wrote the song *Bumaye*[17]. Inspired by the legend surrounding Muhammad Ali, Typhoon uses a biblical reference to convey an ultimately humanistic message. I have found that this song perfectly captures the narrative of the African American. The struggle to actually be *seen* as perfectly imperfect human beings along with the realization that we as humans must get up and *do it ourselves*. The lyrics are originally in Dutch, both interpretations are produced below:

En ja, je moet zelf er iets van maken, wat doe jij er aan om jezelf niet kwijt te raken? Ik wil niet dramatisch doen maar geen één probleem is te groot, we staan in David z'n schoen Dus breek een been pak een steen overwin je angsten Toon karakter en vergroot je kansen Gebrek aan zelfkennis is een hel maar helaas onderschatten wij onszelf	And yes, only you can make it work, how do you make sure that you don't lose yourself? I don't mean to be dramatic but no one problem is too big, we stand in the shoe of David So break a leg pick up a rock conquer your fears Show character and increase your chances Lack of self-knowledge is like hell it's a shame we underestimate ourselves

(De Randamie, 2005:1:00)

The song Bumaye is a call to action. Towards the realization of human potential by "picking up the rock" and striving to being your best self. A number of times Typhoon makes sure to "greet all his kings and queens" – a metaphor for perhaps the ultimate paragon of human worth. Finally, Typhoon alerts us that we are all worthy to be seen as kings and queens, no one should be able to make you believe you are anything else, but we have to take responsibility for our circumstances, to make sure we can grow.

A parallel with Pinn's quest for complex subjectivity.

[17] https://youtu.be/fq5ePtSp5kk – Retrieved on January 11 2023.

An example of what we might uncover, can be the *hidden* humanism we have found at the heart of the Black religious experience. Obscured by Christianity is a belief and a deeply felt desire to elevate humanity as a whole. Not by prayer, but by *doing* all you can to change your circumstances. I have come to believe that this core may be present in all African religions. As my dear (little) brother once said; "You can pray all you want, but you must not forget to do the work. And you must believe in what you pray for." This speaks to the responsibility given to us, as humans, to build the lives we dream of.

I do have hope – humanism being self-critical and non-dogmatic – that we as a humanist community can thoroughly examine the way colonialism and race continue to influence our thought and organizations. An excellent place to start would be educating a wider audience regarding the foundations of humanist thought laid by many canonized thinkers.
What basic assumptions have they made regarding the organization of society and do these still hold? Seeing the transformation in society, humanism cannot afford to keep reproducing the silences regarding our colonial past. We must find a way to face the darkness – learn to relate to this discomfort and start the process of healing. This might be a strong way forward to create a more welcoming experience for non-Western freethinkers at the humanist table.

My earliest experience in joining the Dutch Humanist Association as a Black woman was unfortunately an experience of *disconnection.* I was a member; I could freely attend meetings – but I did not feel welcome at that specific meeting and could not understand why. All I remember was being stared at. I felt like the "other", even when I considered myself to be a "true" humanist. I never went back. Luckily, almost 10 years later, my experience at the University for Humanistic Studies was very different. Still, many fellow students left us the first year, feeling unworthy of the humanist standard (if there ever was such a thing!).
My only hope is that we can keep opening doors and making space for the growth of all.

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