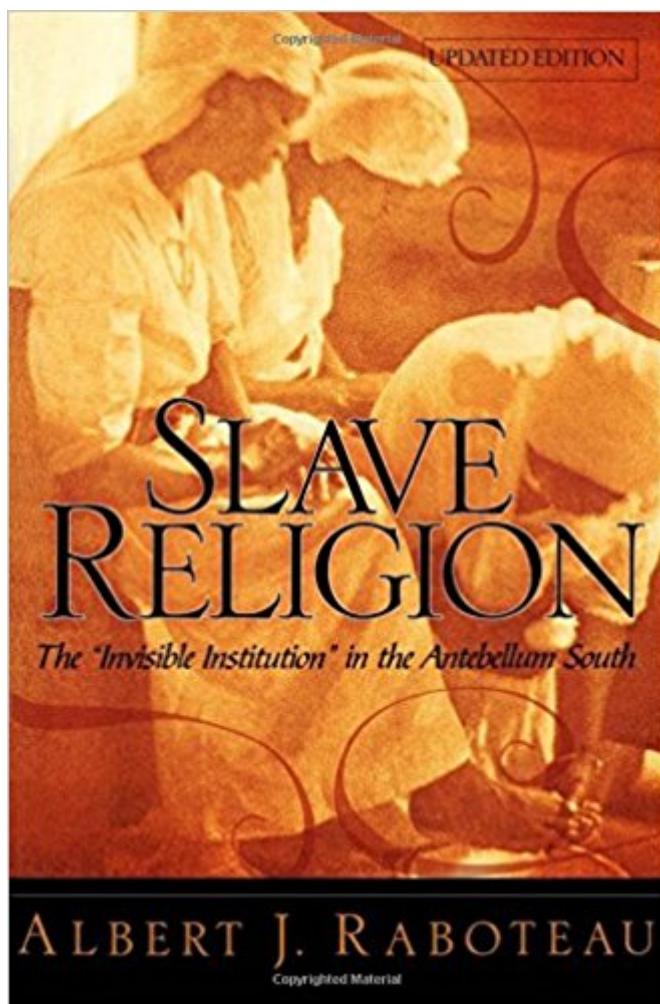


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# Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" In The Antebellum South



## **Synopsis**

Twenty-five years after its original publication, *Slave Religion* remains a classic in the study of African American history and religion. In a new chapter in this anniversary edition, author Albert J. Raboteau reflects upon the origins of the book, the reactions to it over the past twenty-five years, and how he would write it differently today. Using a variety of first and second-hand sources-- some objective, some personal, all riveting-- Raboteau analyzes the transformation of the African religions into evangelical Christianity. He presents the narratives of the slaves themselves, as well as missionary reports, travel accounts, folklore, black autobiographies, and the journals of white observers to describe the day-to-day religious life in the slave communities. *Slave Religion* is a must-read for anyone wanting a full picture of this "invisible institution."

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Albert J. Raboteau originally wrote 'Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South' as an expansion and derivation of his doctoral dissertation, little expecting it to become a classic. This updated version, twenty-five years after its original publication in 1978, includes Raboteau's response to some of the reactions he received over time from various audiences. Citing his friend and mentor Sydney Ahlstrom's prediction, the recovery of African-American history as a subject in its own right also served to revitalise the subject of American religious history, as African-American history cannot be told without a great part of the religious traditions, and the religious history of America cannot be told adequately without incorporation of the African-American experience. Raboteau writes in terms of recovering voices, particularly for this study, the voices of

slaves preserved in narratives from the past. This idea of recovering voices is a strong theme in liberation theologies, and applies in important ways both to secular and religious history (as well as present-day practice). Not only the voices, but also the actual events need to be recovered - as Raboteau points out, before the 1820s, far more Africans made the trans-Atlantic journey to the Americas unwillingly than Europeans of all nationalities and religions. The idea of European development of the New World obscures this important fact. But just what was slave culture? Was this something distinct and unique? Were there multiple slave cultures?

Albert J. Raboteau's "Slave Religion" examines the "Invisible Institution," slave religion in the Antebellum South. When Africans arrived in the New World, they were torn from "the political, social, and cultural systems that had ordered their lives" (p. 4). Raboteau explains that one of the few areas in which slaves were able to maintain their culture, linking the African past with the American present, was their religion. African religious beliefs were transformed or adapted to American Christianity. In some parts of the Americas, Raboteau contends, "the gods of Africa continued to live - in exile." (p. 5). Despite the cruelty placed on American slaves and without family and kinship systems, they were still able to develop, create, and assemble a rich and unique culture in the United States. How did they survive and adapt religion to fit their situation? This is what Raboteau attempts to answer. Much of black religious life was "hidden from the eyes of the master" and occurred in the secrecy of the quarters. The slaves combined their African ethnic religion, Muslim religion, and Christianity to form what is called the "Invisible Institution." Slaves were secretive because it was necessary for survival. Through prayer meetings, spirituals, ring shouts, slave preaching, and the conversion experience, slaves were able to adapt African rituals and beliefs to Christianity. African American religion began out of necessity; the captured Africans needed something to sustain them during the middle passage. Once they arrived, slaves needed someone to administer rituals for special events, such as birth, marriages, illness, death, and other events that required a ceremony.

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