



*Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*

## **The Religious Imagination and Ideas of Jean Price-Mars (Part 1)**

**Celucien Joseph**

[celucien\\_joseph@yahoo.com](mailto:celucien_joseph@yahoo.com)

Jean Price-Mars was a towering figure in the discipline of Africana study, and a passionate proponent of the revalorization of African retentions in the black diaspora, especially on Haitian soil. Scholars have identified him as the Francophone counterpart of W.E.B. Du Bois for his activism, scholarly rigor, leadership efficiency, and his efforts in the rehabilitation of the black race. In Haitian thought, he is regarded as the most important Haitian intellectual in the twentieth-century, having exercised an enduring intellectual influence on the generation of the American Occupation in Haiti (1915-1934) and the post-Occupation culture from the 1930s to 1970s. He is especially known for launching a cultural nationalism and an anti-imperial

movement against the brutal American military forces in Haiti; his work was instrumental in the process of fostering national unity among Haitians of all social classes and against their American oppressor, and in the process of embracing Afro-Haitian popular religious culture.

His scholarly discourse about the nature and origins of Haitian identity and the religion of Vodou is articulated chiefly in his 1928 seminal work *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle (So Spoke the Uncle)*. While students of Haitian studies and scholars of religion have praised him for his scientific study of the Vodou faith and his intelligent argument for the viability of Vodou as religion, few critics have analyzed the complexity of his religious imagination and ideas.<sup>1</sup> The goal of this essay is to analyze Price-Mars's engagements with religion beyond the religion of Vodou. Particularly, it will focus on his philosophy of religion and his thought on the nature of belief. I contend that Price-Mars's support of cultural relativism theory had shaped his view on religious *métissage* and religious diversity. I will draw primarily from the religious rhetoric of *So Spoke the Uncle* and his other works. I argue to view Price-Mars as a postmodernist religious thinker

---

<sup>1</sup> To read about Price-Mars's general contributions to the Haitian society and black global history, see Jean Price-Mars (*Témoignages sur la vie et l'œuvre du Dr. Jean Price-Mars, 1876-1956*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de l'Etat, 1956). This book pays tribute to Jean Price-Mars on the occasion of his 80th birthday written by sixty authors. Some of the influential figures contributing to this text include W.E.B. Du Bois, Leopold S. Senghor, James Leyburn, Fernando Ortiz, Gabriel Debien, Roger Bastide, Dantes Bellegarde, Ernst Trouillot, Lesli Manigat, Jean Fouchard; Recently, twenty five scholars have discussed the importance of *Ainsi parla l'Oncle* and the legacy of Jean Price-Mars in Haiti and abroad which resulted in (*Ainsi parla l'Oncle suivi Revisiter l'Oncle*. Québec: Mémoire d'Encrier, 2009); Michael Largey has documented the significance of Price-Mars in Haiti's ethnological movement, the inspired-peasant music culture, and his contributions in fostering Haitian nationalist consciousness in the twentieth-century (*Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Hénock Trouillot has written one of the most insightful evaluations of Price-Mars's thought and his intellectual influence on Haitian life (*La pensée du Dr. Jean Price-Mars*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Théodore, 1956).

and a religious syncretist. This essay will show *what* and *how* Price-Mars contributed to the disciplines of religion, religious pluralism, cultural studies, and his promotion of religious tolerance.

Price-Mars was a transdisciplinary scholar, boundary-crosser, and cross-cultural theorist; in an unorthodox way, he had brought in conversation various disciplines including anthropology, ethnography, sociology, history, religion, philosophy, race theory, and literature to analyze and reevaluate African traditions and popular beliefs in Haiti, which resulted in the trilogy: *La Vocation de l'élite* (1919), *Ainsi parla l'Oncle: essai d'ethnographie* (1928), and *Une étape de l'évolution haïtienne* (1929).<sup>2</sup> Price-Mars's discourse on religion is distinguished by its emphasis on African religiosity and spirituality, as attested by his critics. For example, Gérard Magloire-Danton writes that Price-Mars "contributes to a major epistemic change in regard to Afro-Christian and African-derived belief systems by placing Vodou...in the same category of thought as monotheistic belief systems."<sup>3</sup> While Price-Mars had given a sympathetic approach to the Vodou religion, he was a religious pluralist in his approach to faith and religious sensibility. I am contending that he was not committed to any religion or theological creed. The goal of this

---

<sup>2</sup> His other major writings on history, biography, race, black emancipation, the Haitian Revolution, Haitian culture, Haiti and the Dominican Republic include the following: *Formation ethnique, folkore et culture du peuple haïtien*. Port-au Prince: Éditions Virgile Valcin, 1939 ; *Contribution haïtienne à la lutte des Amériques pour les libertés humaines*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de l'État, 1942 ; *La République d'Haïti et la République Dominicaine*. Volume 1. Port-au-Prince: S.N., 1953; *De Saint Domingue à Haïti: Essai sur la culture, les arts et la littérature*. Volume 2. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959 ; *Silhouettes de nègres et de négrophiles*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1960 ; *Joseph Anténor Firmin*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie du Séminaire Adventiste, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Magloire-Danton, "Anténor Firmin and Jean Price-Mars: Revolution, Memory, Humanism," *Small Axe* 18:9 (2005):169.

series of essays—which I divided in two parts—is to justify this claim. The general objective is to provide a clearer understanding on the development of Price-Mars’s religious thought and to study his engagements with faith. In both pieces, I will address four major issues involving Price-Mars’s religious sensibilities and ideas. This present essay (Part I) examines Price-Mars’s philosophy of religion and his discussion on the nature of belief. The second and forthcoming essay (Part II) will analyze Price-Mars’s reflections on the racialization of religion and his critiques of Christianity. It will also comment on his sociology of religion particularly in the context of the Haitian society. Finally, the second essay will conclude with Price-Mars’s contributions to Liberation Theology. What did Price-Mars think about God, Jesus, and God’s relationship to the oppressed people of the world? What did he say about the religious sentiments of the Haitian people? What did he observe about the intersection of religion, culture, and race? In these series of essays, I seek to shed some light on these critical issues. First, let us consider his thought on or philosophy of religion.

### **Price-Mars’s Philosophy of Religion**

Jean Price-Mars was born on October 15, 1876, in Grande-Rivière du Nord in Haiti, and died on March 1, 1969. His father Jean Eléomont Mars was a devout Protestant; his mother Fortuna Michel Domingue, who died in a small pox epidemic when Price-Mars was only six

years old, adhered to the Catholic faith.<sup>4</sup> Price-Mars was reared in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. At the prestigious Lycée Pétion in Port-au-Prince, he furthered his secondary education; there, he “identified himself as Protestant, obtained permission to attend Baptist services at the weekends, and explored the city at will during the week.”<sup>5</sup> Price-Mars biographer Jacques Carmeleau Antoine states that “though he sought and obtained permission to attend Baptist services, he spent more time roaming about the city than in Church.”<sup>6</sup> His attitude toward religion was cold and was caught in “the throes of an inner conflict.”<sup>7</sup> After receiving his baccalaureate in July 1895 from the Lycée, he immediately began medical training at the National School of Medicine. In 1899, he received a scholarship from the Haitian government to continue his medical studies in Paris at the Faculté de médecine. He later received his doctor of medicine degree in Haiti. “The heavy intellectual atmosphere of the French capital gave Price-Mars ample stimulation.”<sup>8</sup> In Paris, Price-Mars pursued other interests in the social sciences and humanities at Sobornne, the Collège de France, and equally at the Musée du Trocadéro and the

---

<sup>4</sup> There are only two biographies in the English language about Jean Price-Mars: Jacques Carmeleau Antoine, (*Jean Price-Mars and Haiti*. Washington: Three Continents Press, Inc., 1981), and Magdaline W. Shannon, (*Jean Price-Mars, the Haitian Elite and the American Occupation, 1915-1935*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1996). Emile Paultre has written the first and award-winning (Prix de l’Alliance Française, 1932) biography in French in 1933 while Price-Mars was still living. He latter complemented his work in 1966 three years before Price-Mars’s death in 1969, which resulted in (*Essai sur M. Price-Mars. Deuxième Edition avec une étude complémentaire sur: La vie et l’oeuvre de M. Price-Mars depuis 1930...* Port-au-Prince : Les Editions des Antilles, S.A., 1966).

<sup>5</sup> Shannon, *Jean Price-Mars, the Haitian Elite and the American Occupation*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Antoine, *Jean Price-Mars and Haiti*, 24-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Largey, *Vodou Nation*, 44.

Museum of Natural History.<sup>9</sup> Price-Mars had read widely in the European modern thought and was schooled in anthropology, ethnography, sociology, and the racialist discourse of Western intellectuals.<sup>10</sup>

After his mother's death, the grieving Eléomont confined the young Price-Mars to the care of his maternal grandmother, Marie Elizabeth P. Godart. As Price-Mars reports, her grandmother had hoped to make him a "model of virtue...She believed that it was necessary to impart to him at home a taste for work and respect for honor, to enable him to discover by himself only intellectual discipline, but also the principles of a noble, proud life through character development and extensive knowledge."<sup>11</sup> Godart had inculcated these values in the young including religious instruction and the respect for all expressions of faith.

At an early age until the time for personal decision, Price-Mars had exercised great interests in the biblical teachings of his Protestant father and was committed to the Catholic sensibility of his grandmother. Antoine notes that the religious dichotomy around him "was tempered by the conciliatory demonstrated by his father and grandmother,"<sup>12</sup> an important asset that would contribute eventually to his vision of religious tolerance. Price-Mars himself reports

---

<sup>9</sup> Magloire-Danton, "Anténor Firmin and Jean Price-Mars," 162.

<sup>10</sup> In *La Vocation de l'Elite*, Price-Mars recounts his encounter with the eminent French sociologist and anthropologist Gustave Le Bon whose work, *Lois psychologiques d'évolution des peuples* (1894), Price-Mars had read while he was studying in Paris. Le Bon's text divided the various races according to their psychological tendencies and characteristics. The book also supports the theory of racial inequality and inferiority, and champions European racial ingenuity. Price-Mars, in his famous debate with Le Bon, challenges his view on race and the "inherent" moral aptitude of Europeans.

<sup>11</sup> Antoine, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

that his parents had “agreed that the child should follow his grandmother’s religion [Catholicism] until reaching the age to decide for himself. He was taught to honor with esteem and respect all sincere manifestations of piety. Probably, it was this liberal conception of the most serious problem in human life that later made him tend... toward compromise and conciliation.”<sup>13</sup> The key terms in this declaration underscoring Price-Mars’s early religious attitude are “compromise” and “conciliation,” which had facilitated an opening to his development of religious pluralism and acceptance of all faiths. Nonetheless, Emile Paultre, Price-Mars’s first biographer, reports that Price-Mars had experienced a crisis of faith in his adolescent years which had deepened his religious curiosity.<sup>14</sup> Price-Mars had attempted to solve this dilemma by subscribing to a postmodernist orientation to belief. For him, no religion could claim to be the custodian or depository of truth; the predicament of religion lies in its inability to satisfactorily meet individual aspirations and human needs, and solve the problem of pain.<sup>15</sup>

The clearest manifestation of Price-Mars’s religious views is expressed in his epoch-making and controversial work, *Ainsi Parla l’Oncle* (1928) on Haitian popular culture and the religious sentiments of the Haitian masses. He describes his objective in this statement: “This entire book is an endeavor to integrate the integration of popular Haitian thought into the discipline of traditional ethnography.”<sup>16</sup> Price-Mars also articulates that *l’Oncle* aims at the

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. ; Jean Price-Mars, *La Relève*, vol.3, December 1934, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Paultre, *Essai sur M. Price-Mars*, 30-1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Price-Mars, (*So Spoke the Uncle: Ethnographic Essays*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, Inc., 1983): 7.

restoration of the value of Haitian folk-lore in the eyes of the people.<sup>17</sup> While the book had achieved its purpose and great scholarly reviews both in Haiti and abroad, many critics have failed to examine Price-Mars's major arguments for the legitimacy of other religions such as Buddhism. They have stopped at his religious thinking about the Afro-Haitian Vodou spirituality.

Historian Catts Pressoir, after a critical review of *l'Oncle*, concludes that Price-Mars had effectively articulated the problem of civilization in Haiti and the greater problem of interaction between barbarous and civilized races. Yet, in his evaluation of Price-Mars's religious ideas, he concluded that Price-Mars was a "Christian moralist."<sup>18</sup> Pressoir is unclear about this religious label describing Price-Mars religious affections; he had failed to tell us what constitutes a Christian moralist. Contrary to this position—as I have thus demonstrated in the aforementioned paragraphs—I'm arguing that Price-Mars was not an adherent to any religious system nor had he embraced any theological creed. He was open to all religious expressions or beliefs; and as his arguments in *l'Oncle* substantiate, he was interested in interfaith dialogue. In fact, in his well-known debate with the French priest and theologian Joseph Foisset in 1945 on the subject of his book, Price-Mars affirmed his commitment to "no-religion." Foisset, who had misread Price-Mars and misconstrued the central tenets of the book, believed that it was unacceptable for Price-Mars to compare the Vodou faith and Christianity because the gaps between the two religions are

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Catts Pressoir, "Ainsi parla l'Oncle," *Le Nouvelliste*, October 20 and 22, 1928 ; Shannon, 70.



too profound. In response, Price asserted that “I don’t do apologetics. I defended neither dogmas nor doctrines” (“*Je ne fais pas d’apologétique. Je ne défendais ni dogmes ni doctrines*”).<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, In his preface to *Vodou, je me souviens: essai*—a book that seeks dialogue between Vodou and Christianity—Joseph Augustin had limited Price-Mars’s religious vision to the defense of the Afro-Haitian Vodou : “*En 1928, dans son célèbre ‘Ainsi parla l’oncle,’ le docteur Jean Price-Mars, sur le plan sociologique, campe le Vodou comme la religion des Noirs, aussi digne que le christianisme, religion des Blancs*”<sup>20</sup> (“In 1928, in his famous work *So Spoke the Uncle*, Doctor Jean Price-Mars, on the sociological level, presents Vodou, the religion of blacks worthy as Christianity, the religion of whites.”). According to this author, Price-Mars had presented Vodou, “the black religion,” as equally important to Christianity, “the white religion.” Augustin had erred for articulating a false dichotomy of religion based on racial categories which Price-Mars never supported. While Price-Mars had advanced that Vodou is originated from the Dahomean-Benin region of Africa—a geographical location, not a racial reference—he had not explicitly stated anywhere that Vodou is inherently a black faith.<sup>21</sup> And there is no evidence to suggest a similar perspective on Christianity as the religion of white people. In several of his

---

<sup>19</sup> Hérold Toussaint, “Ethnologue et Théologie en Haiti: Signification d’une problématique entre le Père Joseph Foisset et le Dr. Jean Price-Mars,” in *Ainsi Parla l’Oncle suivi de Revisiter l’Oncle* (Québec: Mémoire d’Encrier, 2009), 391.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Fils-Aimé, (*Vodou, je me souviens:essai*. Québec : Les Editions Dabar 2007), iii.

<sup>21</sup> See especially his rebuttals to W. B. Seabook in his *Magic Island* who had equated Vodou to Haitian sensationalism, exoticism, and racial savagery (*Une Etape de l’évolution haitienne*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie “La Presse,” 1929), 109-132.

lectures, he had bluntly dismissed this form of racial essentialism as applied to racial groups and religion, and correspondingly he had refuted constructed racial categories, and the idea of race.<sup>22</sup>

Almost in a similar rhetoric, theologian Jean Casséus in a recent work, *Eléments de la Théologie Haïtienne*, has wrongly interpreted Price-Mars's religious position that "*Le Vaudou serait la vraie religion du peuple haïtien*"<sup>23</sup> ("The Vodou would be the true religion of the Haitian people"). First, to make such a claim is to propose that Price-Mars was a religious exclusivist. Second, to articulate such a position is to aver religious absolutism which denies Price-Mars's religious pluralism. It is true that Price-Mars had posited that Vodou is largely practiced by the majority of Haitian peasants, but he had not made the claim of Vodou as the "only" religion in Haiti nor had he excluded other religious expressions in the everyday experience of the Haitian people.<sup>24</sup> In acknowledgment of the religious diversity and culture of the Haitian people, Price-Mars made the following statement: "All Haitians are Christian, Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman. In the large cities and more rarely in the country, there are also some followers of reformed religions—Baptists, Adventists, Methodists, Wesleyans—who form an active and Zealous minority."<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> See especially his 1906 lecture, "Le Préjugé des races" in (*La Vocation de l'élite*. Port-au-Prince: Edmond Chenet, 1919), 165-187 as well as his lecture, "De l'Esthétique dans les races" in the same volume, 191-209.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Casséus, (*Eléments de Théologie Haïtienne*. Port-au-Prince : La Presse Evangélique, 2007), 90.

<sup>24</sup> See his affirmation of the religious diversity of the Haitian people: Jean Price-Mars (*Formation ethnique folk-lore et culture du peuple haïtien*. Imprimerie N.A. Théodore, 1956), 85-91.

<sup>25</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 103.

We also observe a misunderstanding of Price-Mars in the theological work of Jean Fils-Aimé who asserts that Price-Mars had presented himself as “*le défenseur du vodou.*” He writes in *Ainsi parla l’Oncle Price-Mars “s’est fait le défenseur du vodou qu’il présent comme le ciment de la culture haïtienne”*<sup>26</sup> (“In *So Spoke the Uncle*, Price-Mars has presented himself as ‘The Denfender of Vodou,’ and shown the religion as the cement of Haitian culture”). There is no doubt that Price-Mars had linked Vodou to the Haitian culture and peasant spirituality. On the other hand, it is erroneous to assume that Price-Mars had committed himself as “the Advocate” of a particular faith, a perspective which he had not endorsed. As we have noted above, Price-Mars had affirmed that he was no religious apologist or proponent of dogmas. Finally, Alfred Métraux correctly reasons that Price-Mars “*revient le mérite d’avoir rendu le vaudou respectable et même sympathique à l’opinion publique haïtienne en exorcisant le fantôme qu’il était devenue*”<sup>27</sup> (Price-Mars “*deserves credit for making voodoo respectable and even sympathetic to the Haitian public opinion in exorcising the ghost that it had become.*”)

As observed above, the non-Vodou thinking of Price-Mars is silent in the aforementioned texts. This body of work as a whole has failed to give a plausible account of Price-Mars’s creative religious imagination and sensibilities in their full spectrum. Price-Mars himself in a conference in 1951 at the Alliance Française in Port-au-Prince had not restricted his religious discourse to a singular expression when he stated that “*Ce n’est pas le vodou que j’aime, c’est la*

---

<sup>26</sup> Fils-Aimé, *Vodou, je me souviens*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Alfred Métraux, (*Le vaudou haïtien*. Paris : Gallimard, 1958), 16.

*science qui s'en occupé.*"<sup>28</sup> ("It is not the vodou that I like, but the science which it is made up."). Price-Mars's religious ideas are a mixed bag incorporating both theistic and non-theistic religious systems, Abrahamaic and non-Abrahamaic religious traditions.<sup>29</sup> When one examines closely the religious rhetoric of *l'Oncle*, it is impossible not to conclude his endorsement of all signs of piety. This is particularly revealing in his comparative study of religion and the application of Emile Durkheim's theory of religion. From his adolescent years and perhaps until his death, Price-Mars had maintained a vision on religion that was wide enough to embrace various kinds of religious spirituality, beliefs, systems, and expressions. He constructed his own religious ideal: "something special, neither Catholic nor Protestant, but a Christianity that recognized truth in all religious without specifying any particular form of worship."<sup>30</sup> I am recommending seeing Price-Mars as a religious pluralist and syncretist because of his intellectual leaning to cultural relativism and religious métissage. His discourse on religion should be examined in light of his belief in the cultural dynamics and interrelationships between cultures and peoples. He interpreted cultures and civilizations as an affair of relations and reciprocity and embraced the same idea for religion. Price-Mars held to the notion of mutual exchanges, interdependence, and the intersection between people, religions, cultures, and ethnic groups.

Price-Mars was one of the first Caribbean scholars to use the concept of cultural *métissage* to describe Caribbean societies, and by implications the religions of the people in the

---

<sup>28</sup>Jean Price-Mars, "Folklore et Patriotisme," *Revue de la Société haïtienne d'histoire, de géographie, et de géologie* 23:84 (1952): 1-16.

<sup>29</sup> For further details, see, Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 35-54.

<sup>30</sup> Antoine, 24 ; Paultre, 30.

Region. Cultural *métissage* is defined as the process of “interweaving or cross breeding;” it bears the notion that any civilization, race, or culture, is a creative process that had to take nourishment from without. Every culture or race is inevitably dependent upon another, and the path to individual and social development would not happen without the process of interpenetration between cultures and civilizations.<sup>31</sup> In respect to the Haitian society, Price-Mars posited that Haiti had developed a distinctive culture that is neither African nor French but an adulterated syncretic blending of African and European civilizations. He writes, “*De cette alchimie sociale découla une culture originale qui ne fut ni africaine, ni française, mais une harmonieuse synthèse de l’une et l’autre dont l’évolution s’est poursuivie et se poursuit sous nos yeux depuis cent cinquante ans de gestation dans les Amériques*”<sup>32</sup> (“From this social alchemy derives an original culture which was neither African nor French, but a harmonious synthesis of both, whose development continued and has continued under our eyes for one hundred and fifty years of gestation in the Americas”). As Stephen Howe has commented on Price-Mars’s reflection about the gradual development of Haitian culture or society: “Even in lauding African civilizational achievements, he wrote of Haiti as the new social form which is slowly emerging from the confusion of mores, beliefs, and custom.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Janet G. Vaillant, (*Black, French, and African: A Life of Leopold Sedar Senghor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 264.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Price-Mars, (*De Saint-Domingue a Haïti : Essai sur la Culture, les Arts et la Littérature*. Paris : Présence Africaine, 1959), 107.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Howe, (*Afrocentricism: Mystical Paths and Imagined Homes*. New York: Verso, 1999), 84.

Through the theory of cultural dynamism, Price-Mars was able to apply those ideas in a scientific way to a comparative study of religion. First, he explained how the religious *métissage* occurred in the context of Haitian Vodou and Catholicism. As he studied the syncretic nature of the Vodou religion and Haitian Catholic Christianity, he explained that “Vodou has assimilated much of Catholic theology; it is also continuous with African religious traditions. Continuity and change are cultural processes in every society and will endure whether or not they are studied by scholars.”<sup>34</sup> First, Price-Mars noted that the Afro-Haitian faith is a symbiosis and a process of religious *métissage* between African animism and Western Catholic Christianity. Second, he explained the constitutive elements of the two religious expressions: the Vodou faith and the Catholic tradition in the context of the Haitian culture:

En vérité, ce catholicisme est fort enchevêtré. Il est l’expression de croyances ou se trouvent mêlées, en des rapports indéfinissables, les éléments fondamentaux de la religion vaudouesque—culte des ancêtres et des génies—et les principes dogmatiques de l’économie catholique.<sup>35</sup>

[In truth, Catholicism is tangled up. It is the expression of beliefs or within which all are mixed, with indefensible connections, the basic elements of the Vodoo religion—the cult of ancestors and of the genuises—and the dogmatic principles of the economy of Catholicism.]

Accordingly, Vodou and Catholicism are connected through the shared ritual of ancestral veneration (or the veneration of the saints) and a common theological worldview. While this may

---

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Leslie G. Desmangles, (*The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 11-2.

<sup>35</sup> Jean Price-Mars, (*Formation ethnique folk-lore et culture du peuple haïtien*. Port-au-Prince : Imprimerie N.A. Théodore, 1956), 86.

not be true in every theological aspect, he pursued his observations by establishing historical links and the interweaving dynamics between the two religions:

Un long travail, un travail séculaire de syncrétisme a assuré une compénétration des deux religions dans l'âme populaire au point que le vodu haïtien en se délestant de la métaphysique dahoméenne dont il dérive a imprégné le christianisme catholique d'apports nouveau que reprouve la pureté de la doctrine.<sup>36</sup>

[A long work, a secular work of syncretism ensured a reciprocal penetration of the two religions in the popular soul so that the Haitian Voodoo yields its dahomean metaphysique of which it derives has immersed itself in Catholic Christianity new linkages which reject the purity of doctrine.]

At this point, he highlighted two important factors: the process of religious syscretism—which also occurs between cultures—and the work of reciprocal penetration, which had helped create new linkages. We can draw several points from his observation. First, religious *métissage* rejects theological absolutism or what Price-Mars had phrased “the purity of doctrine.” Second, this phenomenonal process is also an attack on absolute religious claims (of truth) and religious absolutism. Third, therefore religious syncretism by virtue of shareness, interpenetration, and reciprocity between religions denies the supremacy of one religion. Substantially, Price-Mars held that “whatever may be the milieu in which two or more religions exist side by side, it is inevitable that they will pervade each other and react upon each other indepedently of the desire of men.”<sup>37</sup> He added that this phenomenon occurs especially in the course when “the State interferes to protect one religion at the expense of the others.”<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 166.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, Price-Mars strengthened his thesis by offering numerous examples on the common spiritual practices and shared symbols between Catholicism and the Vodou faith.<sup>39</sup> It is from this angle he could comment on the shared religious vision in popular consciousness between the adherents of both religions. He insisted that they perceive no contradictions within:

Si tout cela aboutit en fin de compte à une certaine similitude de pensée, il n'est pas étonnant que la conscience populaire ait élaborée l'identification des deux religions au point que le vodou haïtien n'est plus du tout l'animisme banal que le premier venu peut aisément détecter chez tout primitif, en même temps que notre catholicisme populaire ne ressemble pas du tout à la religion dogmatique codifiée par des conciles et enseignée par l'Eglise.<sup>40</sup>

If all that in the final analysis leads to a certain similarity of thought, it is not surprising that the popular conscience worked out the identification of the two religions so much so that the Haitian Voodoo is no longer the banal animism than the first can easily detect in all primitive religions, at the same time that our popular Catholicism does not resemble at all the dogmatic religion codified by councils and taught by the Church.]

Considering the implications of these observations for contemporary discussions on interfaith dialogue, cultural studies, morality or ethics, Price-Mars could insist that no one's race, culture, or civilization has the monopoly and that no one's religion is the ultimate source of truth and provides or interprets the decisive meaning to life. He pronounced that "*qu'il n'existe pas de vérité absolue ou objective. Aucun chercheur n'a le monopole de la vérité*"<sup>41</sup> ("There is no absolute truth or objective. No researcher has a monopoly on the truth."). As a consequence, we

---

<sup>39</sup> See his exhaustive comparisons and lists in *So Spoke the Uncle*, 116-172.

<sup>40</sup> Price-Mars, *Formation ethnique folk-lore*, 87. Desmangles writes, "Vodou's close association with Catholicism could have created theological fusion, the two religious systems represented in the minds of their adherents two disparate 'objects' juxtaposed to one another" (*The Faces of the Gods*), 11.

<sup>41</sup> Hérold Toussaint in an article "Ethnologie et Théologie en Haïti" quoted Price-Mars in Jean Price-Mars, (*Ainsi parla l'Oncle suivi de Revisiter l'Oncle*. Québec : Mémoire d'Encrier, 2009), 392.



ought to consider Price-Mars's relativism (or its implication) stresses "that all truth claims can be true only with respect to the particular assumptions and contexts from which they derive. All philosophical claims are relativized by the limitations of the specific historical, cultural, and cognitive contexts out of which these claims are constructed."<sup>42</sup> Also, it is only logical for us to presume that Price-Mars would contend for the imperative of religious diversity, religious inclusivism, and ultimately of religious tolerance. Religious diversity is overwhelmingly crucial in the process of effecting a democratic order; in the same line of thought, religious inclusivism which entails religious tolerance provides an opportunity for people of all faith to benefit from the freedom of worship without fear of threats, and religious discrimination. Putting these various ideas in practice, they could potentially contribute to the development of human freedom, personal and collective self-expression, create an atmosphere of peace between religions, and urge adherents of all religions to cooperate by transcending their religious differences.

In addition, we could also speak of religious postmodernism and locate Price-Mars's religious thought within this very concept. By calling Price-Mars a postmodernist religious thinker, we are suggesting that he believed in the unity and oneness of humanity, and the possibility for individuals to create common values and shared beliefs through a variegated of religious experiences, what John Dewey calls "a common faith." A postmodernist vision to religion, life, and human dynamics supports the idea of cross-cultural relationship and interfaith dialogue. It seeks to persuade us to strive for the best interest of humanity and of all religions in

---

<sup>42</sup> Gary Dorrien, (*Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 17.

our appreciation of diversity and differences. Religious postmodernism also appreciates “the spiritual unity among the plurality of religious faiths.”<sup>43</sup> Price-Mars describes this worldview with great clarity in this paragraph:

Religious beliefs are not just the exaltation of sentiment which makes us test our dependence on cosmic forces and, brought to its highest expression, influences us toward universal communion through love, confidence, and prayer; they have in the highest degree the social virtue of bringing us together in community, of strengthening the bonds that tie the people of the same country together, and beyond the frontiers, peoples, different races, and finally significant portions of humanity for the greatest flowering of the common faith which animates them.<sup>44</sup>

Price-Mars articulates a comparative and pluralistic view to religions and cultures. Such a rational inclination is communicated through various implied concepts (i.e. religious pluralism, religious syncretism, religious postmodernism, etc.) that we identify in/as his overall religious thinking.<sup>45</sup> These observable expressions or ideologies above dethrone metaphysical absolutism and cultural totalitarianism with value relativism and metaphysical pluralism and insist on “imperatives of tolerance, reciprocity, and parity as conditions for the possibility of the peaceful

---

<sup>43</sup> Leonard Harris, (*The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Literature on the subject of religious pluralism, religious syncretism, religious postmodernism, and the intersection of religion, culture, and cultural theories are voluminous. I recommend the following works: John Hick, (*An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Harold A. Netland, (*Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991); Hent De Vries, (*Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999); Harvey Cox, (*The Future of Faith*. New York: Harperone, 2009); Elie Maynard Adams, (*Religion and cultural freedom*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

coexistence of cultures<sup>46</sup> and religions. What did Price-Mars then say about the nature of religion and the nature of belief? To this subject we shall now focus our attention.

### **Price-Mars's Discourse on the Nature of Belief**

By undertaking a comparative approach to religion, Price-Mars in *So Spoke the Uncle* deploys the Durkheimian theory of religion to studying the nature of popular beliefs in Haitian society expressed through religion. He studies comparatively general dispositions, modes of expressions, and representations in various religious systems: the theistic and atheistic traditions, the Abrahamaic faiths, African animism, and Asian religions.<sup>47</sup> In the second chapter (“Les croyances populaires”) (“Popular beliefs”) of the book, he begins with a philosophical conversation about the nature and significance of religious beliefs. By “popular beliefs,” first, Price-Mars situates religion within the sphere of the community of adherents or believers. Second, the expression conveys the sum total of the psychological phenomena in which modalities of popular beliefs in the collective sense may burst out in manifestations of trust and piety.<sup>48</sup> Price-Mars puts forward that religion might lead to self-confidence and a commitment to spiritual development. While he is affirming conflict of belief in/of religion, he is suggesting that beliefs in the religious sense might “reveal the uncertainties from which no human creature can escape in the presence of enigmas which beset us from birth to the grave.”<sup>49</sup> Here, he is

---

<sup>46</sup> Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> See especially chapter V: “African Animism” (83-101), and Chapter VI: “The Religious Sentiments of the Haitian Masses” (103-172).

<sup>48</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

presenting religion as a possible source of epistemology in the human experience, but it does not explain everything in the world. Yet, religion might be a dreadful event to encounter, as Price-Mars tells us elsewhere, it is really “the most serious problem in human life.”<sup>50</sup>

If religion could create both fear and self-assurance, then it is an unwavering phenomenon. We must intervene by noting that religion is neither good nor bad. It could be used as a tool in the accomplishment of both things. As Phil Zucherman observes, “As a social construction and a human projection, religion encapsulates both the wonders and the warts of humanity and has the potential to exemplify one, the other, or both.”<sup>51</sup> Price-Mars remarks that religious beliefs might express the uncertainty of human experience and the ambiguity of life itself. Being described in this way, evidently the crisis of religious indecision is an epistemological problem as well as a theological one. In other words, in the thought of John Dewey, “beliefs that comprise religion can no longer lay claim to absolute certainty, and so leaves individuals without certain answers to questions about life’s ultimate meaning.”<sup>52</sup> The statement by Dewey does not necessarily suggest that religion is meaningless or has nothing to offer to life. Price-Mars would have consented that religion does contribute or add to life meaning, and that “religion not only can help but may also be essential to constructing worthwhile lives—but only if our understanding of what religion is, how it works, and what sorts

---

<sup>50</sup> Price-Mars, *La Relève*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Phil Zuckerman, (*Du Bois on Religion*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>52</sup> Melvin L. Rogers, (*The undiscovered Dewey: Religion, morality, and the ethos of democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 110.

of purposes it serves are reworked to reflect the limits of human finitude.”<sup>53</sup> For instance, he believes that slave religion paved the way to the Haitian Revolution and identified itself with the dream of slave emancipation in Saint-Domingue in the night of 1791. He sees black spirituality, having liberating potential, contributed to the social transformation and reversal of the colonial order of slavery at Saint.<sup>54</sup> As he affirms in this statement, “Their ancestral beliefs became the leaven of the revolt against odious oppression.”<sup>55</sup>

He continues the discussion by asserting that “beliefs are the most apparent and most representative expression of folk-lore” disseminated through oral traditions and the everyday experiences of the individual and the collective masses.<sup>56</sup> He recommends that beliefs should be studied in their actual manifestations, in their recent or distant origins. The goal is twofold: to unravel them from the symbolism in which they are developed and to compare them to other state of consciousness as felt by other peoples.<sup>57</sup> In short, modalities of popular beliefs ought to be analyzed carefully in their origins, their evolution, and their actual practices with scientific rigor.

Price-Mars proceeds by affirming and discussing the mysterious nature of religious beliefs. There are times, he asserts, beliefs can be unexpressive due to legal restrictions (or the pressures of the law) and human surroundings which would eventually lead to (collective)

---

<sup>53</sup> Jonathon S. Kahn, (*Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.

<sup>54</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 46-7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibi.*, 34.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

resistance to the oppressive power (s).<sup>58</sup> It is within these complex situations or life conditions the opening for persistence of beliefs arises. He elucidates on this psychological state in the following words:

But we are well aware of the resilient power of which any belief is capable that is supported by the whole mass of time-honored sentiment. It plunges its roots into the unfathomable depths of the subconscious all the more tenaciously as it is constrained to dissimulate itself.<sup>59</sup>

In the course of his discourse on the nature of belief, Price-Mars articulates that religious modalities in the form of prayers, meditations, homilies, songs, dances, etc., might be perceived as “the essence of various representations in the minds which cling too close to the state of nature to accept man’s most magnificent proof of nobility, this curiosity by which we are overcome in the face of the unknown and perhaps the unknowable which floods our universe.”<sup>60</sup> For Price-Mars, religion seems to be a natural stage in the development of the human mind; hence he presupposes that all individuals are capable of imagining some form of religion by whatever name we might call it.<sup>61</sup> He locates beliefs in the sphere of the human intellect; he tells us that it is possible for the mind to capture various religious expressions and forms. Religion, as he observes, is a curious phenomenon because of the unstable nature it constitutes. It confronts us with the life mysteries, even the unknown. Price-Mars distinguishes religion to popular beliefs. He posits that any religious tradition is subservient to popular beliefs which might result

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>59</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Antenor Firmin, Price-Mars’s intellectual ancestor, made a similar argument (*The Equality of Human Races*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 354.

in a cult and traditions. While he reports that general beliefs are “rested upon authentic acts of faith,” religion is then contingent upon this performance of mental disposition.<sup>62</sup> That is, religious spirituality and practices and rituals are manifestations of actual beliefs embodied in acts of faith; they lead to the adherence of a religion.<sup>63</sup> It is at this junction he identifies popular beliefs as religious sentiments and phenomena to the practice and performance of religion. So, for Price-Mars religion is many things: (1) concrete beliefs, (2) acts of faith, and (3) phenomenal sentiments.

Like Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Price-Mars dismisses the fundamental notion that religion as the “the essential bond which links the divinity with man.”<sup>64</sup> In this way, he dismisses Schleiermacher’s characterization of religious experience as *the feeling of absolute dependence* and rejects the view that the central element in religious life is “the consciousness of one’s self as absolutely dependent.”<sup>65</sup> As Durkheim remarks, “Religion can be defined only in terms of features that are found whenever religion is found.”<sup>66</sup> Price-Mars further finds problematic another conception of religion as solely “the symbol of an attachment of man to a being or to some spiritual beings upon whom he depends.”<sup>67</sup> First, in the course of

---

<sup>62</sup> *Ibi.*, 35.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 36; Emile Durkheim, (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press, 1995), 21-3.

<sup>65</sup> William L Rowe, (*Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 55.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 37.

critiquing this position, Price-Mars suggests that such a perception on religion may only apply to highly evolved religions such as the Abrahamaic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Second, the idea would exclude atheistic religions such as Buddhism and other expressions that do not involve man's dependence upon a God or the supernatural intervention in human's affairs. As a consequence, he proposes a definition of religion that is wide enough to incorporate all kinds of beliefs—theistic and atheistic, Abrahamaic and non-Abrahamic faiths— and, as he insists, one that is “broad enough to satisfy completely the exigencies of the most complex religions while at the same time including the simple terms of the most elementary forms of religious phenomena and sentiments.”<sup>68</sup> It is good to note here, as Jonathon S. Kahn states, “Even without a metaphysically robust God, we humans still find ourselves wanting to make the world live up to a heavenly ideal.”<sup>69</sup> Evidently, our “religious imperatives” might direct us to the conclusion that we belong to something greater than ourselves; the sense of moral justice, and the need, when justice fails, human pain increases, for well-being and consolation in a world suffused with suffering and brutishness, might compel us to desire or call upon for supernatural assistance.<sup>70</sup> Price-Mars insists on the incapacity of religion or any system of morality; respond

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 36. At this point, Price-Mars is echoing Durkheim's religious description: “We will incorporate all the religious systems we can know, past as well as present, the most primitive and simple as well as the most modern and refined, for we have no right to exclude some so as to keep only certain others, and no logical method of doing so” (*The Elements of Religious Life*, 22). It is also good to point out that at the time of Price-Mars's writing in the 1920s, religious scholars had classified world religions hierarchically: the advanced or highly evolved religions and the least advanced or undeveloped religions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam would be placed in the first category; African animistic religions and those of the Asian Continent would be classified in the second category. The word “primitive religion” was also used for the second group of religions.

<sup>69</sup> Kahn, *Divine Discontent*, 34.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



adequately to life's greatest questions, and to deal satisfactorily with the uncertainties of life and human needs. The questions he poses below reveal there is a crisis of faith or belief:

Do we not find ourselves—many of us at least—helpless and apprehensive each time that certain phenomena go beyond the limit of our actual knowledge? What is the purpose of life, its origin and its end? Have we not meditated painfully on these eternal questions for as long as there have been men who thought? And on whom shall we rely to find an explanation of these problems that is worthy of our intellectual pride?<sup>71</sup>

Assuredly, Price-Mars doubts the supernatural response to these provocative questions or problems. He, however, does not rebuke those who seek divine help, when he pronounces:

Those who take refuge in a prudent wisdom find that most of these questions border on the extreme limit of our investigations and of our ability to understand—at the unknowable of things, while others, the great majority of men, believe in the omnipresence of a superior being, master of all things in this world and director of its harmony.<sup>72</sup>

For Price-Mars, religion is workable without God or within the paradigm of an atheistic vision of life. Contrary to Rudolf Otto's theistic definition of religious experience, that the phenomenon of religious experience might be construed as "an experience in which one senses the immediate presence of the divine."<sup>73</sup> Rather, Price-Mars counters that thesis and proposes that religious experience is a relationship to the sacred, not necessarily God. As we will observe below, the "sacred" is varied in Price-Mars logic. The Price-Marsian perspective is more revealing when he asks rhetorically: "Are there not great religions in existence in which the idea

---

<sup>71</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 85.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, 57; Rudolf Otto, (*The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

of gods and spirits is absent or at least plays only a secondary and inconspicuous role?”<sup>74</sup> He names the obvious: “This is the case in Buddhism notably.... an ethic without god and atheism without nature...It does not recognize any god on whom man depends, and its doctrine is completely atheistic.”<sup>75</sup> In this vein, it is thus feasible to answer life’s “religious demand,” in the Jamesian logic, for meaning even when we can no longer accept God or clearly discern the divine blueprint, underpinning reality.<sup>76</sup>

Price-Mars’s appeal to Buddhism as “a religion without god” and his mentioning of the four propositions, “the noble truths” of Buddhism, is an attempt to reorient our religious consciousness to religious inclusivism and pluralism, and to authenticate the least advanced faiths including the so-called “primitive religions” and those of African traditions which he pursues in Chapter 5 (“African Animism”) of *So Spoke the Uncle*.<sup>77</sup> He presents Buddhism as a religion that went from the simple to the complex form. In the first paragraph that follows, he

---

<sup>74</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 36.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> William James, (*The Will to Believe and Human Immortality*. New York: Dove, 1959), 39-61; Kahn, *Divine Discontent*, 34.

<sup>77</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 83-101. On page 37, in his discussion of the tenets of Buddhism, he writes: “The first considers the existence of pain as bound to the perpetual flow of matter; the second shows desire as the cause of unhappiness; the third makes the suppression of desire the only means of suppressing unhappiness; the fourth enumerates the three stages through which one must pass in order to attain this suppression: they are justice, mediation, and finally wisdom bringing full possession of the doctrine. Having traversed these three stages, one arrives at the end of the road, at deliverance, at salvation through Nirvana.” For further research on Buddhism, the reader is advised to consult the following studies: D. T. Suzuki, (*An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. New York: Grove Press, 1944); Thich Nhat Hanh, (*The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999); Lama Surya Das, (*Awakening the Buddha Within: Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World*. Portland: Broadway Books, 1998)

summarizes the values of Buddhism (i.e. abstinence, compassion, humility, love, sacrifice, holiness, etc.) which are common to all religions:

If on the other hand, man finds in the contemplation of abstinence, in the practice of charity, in humility, and in external sacrifice, the opportunity of achieving a state of holiness and blessedness which frees him from the miseries and the disabilities of the flesh without even calling upon external intervention, then Buddhism in its beginning has given us the proof of a religion without god.<sup>78</sup>

In the second paragraph below, he reiterates his argument for the viability of Buddhism as a religion without a god. Still, he is emphasizing his former contention that religion does not need a god (or gods or spirits) to be called so and claim religiosity:

We have wished simply to stress that if a great religion like Buddhism could arise and live during a certain time in its original purity according to an entirely secular concept, then the definition of religion given above, that is, to understand it as a bond between divinity and man, would exclude Buddhism from the realm of religion and thus bring about a paradoxical conclusion. So we will eliminate the acceptance of religion as the symbol of an attachment of man to a being or to some spiritual beings upon whom he depends, because this is more characteristic of those religions that are already highly evolved.<sup>79</sup>

Accordingly, Buddhism as other religions, for Price-Mars, has met the requirements of a religion because it is potentially capable of coping with what Durkheim has phrased, “the necessities of existence.” It offers wisdom to deal with the absurdity of life. In sum, religion is a manifestation of human activity, is instructive, expresses man, and can help us understand better the human nature and nature of our belief.<sup>80</sup> In the same line of thought, Price-Mars proceeds to defend the authenticity of Vodou as a religion based on these articulated antecedents of

---

<sup>78</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 38.

<sup>79</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 37.

<sup>80</sup> Durkheim, *The Element Forms of Religious Life*, 22.

religiosity. That Vodou is neither superstition nor black magic as traditionally perceived. Like Buddhism, he contends that Vodou as a religious worldview has satisfied all the demands, requirements, constructed notions and ideals of religion.<sup>81</sup> It has its own theology, orders time and space, and possesses its own ethic.<sup>82</sup>

As seen in preceding discussions, Price-Mars was not attempting to support a particular religion; rather he was promoting religious tolerance, the freedom of religion and the freedom of all faiths to coexist. Furthermore, following the Durkheim school of thought on religion, Price-Mars establishes that “all the known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, have a universal characteristic: they assume a classification of real or ideal things which men have introduced as to opposite types, designated generally by the clear-cut terms of the profane and of the sacred.”<sup>83</sup> The two general characteristics that all religion share in common include “the real and ideal things,” and “the profane and of the sacred.” Certainly, another perceivably shared

---

<sup>81</sup> He articulates three unrefutable arguments for the faith of Haitian peasants:

Voodoo is a religion because all its adherents believe in the existence of spiritual beings who lieve anywhere in the universe in close intimacy with humans whose activity they dominate.

Voodoo is a religion because the cult appertaining to its gods requires a hierachical priestly body, a society of the faithful, temples, altars, ceremonies, and finally a whole oral tradition which has certainly not come down to us unaltered, but thanks to which the essential elements of this worship have been transmitted.

Voodoo is a religion because, amid the confusion of legends and the corruption of fables, we can discern a theology, a system of representation thanks to which our African ancestors have, primitively, account for natural phenomena and which lies dormantly at the base of the anarchical beliefs upon which the hybrid Catholicism of our popular masses rests. (*So Spoke the Uncle* 39).

<sup>82</sup> Magloire-Danton, “Anténor Firmin and Jean Price-Mars,” 169.

<sup>83</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 37.

feature of all that is religious, as Price-Mars acknowledges, is the phenomenon of the supernatural or God. By the “supernatural” or the “transcendence,” he does not necessarily mean the monotheistic God of the Abrahamic religious backgrounds. Second, he distinguishes two domains or spheres—the realm of “the profane” and the realm of “the sacred”—as constitutive aspects of all that is religious. He informs us that “the sacred and the profane form two distinct categories, with the difference residing in the absolutely opposite character of one from the other.”<sup>84</sup> He reckons that this bond is especially expressed in the relationship between a singular spiritual being or superior beings and the human subject; the dynamic however, might be typified by either fear or hope, as the adherent performs his religious duty, worships, and interacts with the superior being. At this point, we might be curious to learn about what the nature of the sacred and the profane is then and their composition? With clarity and precision, Price-Mars follows Durkheim’s consideration on the issue, as he comments:

The division of the world into two domains, “the one including all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought; the beliefs, the myths, the dogmas, the legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of things, the virtues and the powers which are attributed to them, their history, and their affinity to one another and with secular things, the virtues and the powers which are attributed to them, their history, and their affinity to one another and with secular things.”<sup>85</sup>

Therefore, the sacred may liberally include ideas, concepts, things, subjects or might be conceived both as the material and immaterial which embody popular cultural forms and representations. He judges indiscriminately that “By sacred things we do not mean just personal

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>85</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 37; Also, Émile Durkheim and Kenneth Thompson, (*Readings from Emile Durkheim*. New York: Routledge, 1998), 109.

beings that we that we call gods or spirits, and a crag, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in fact anything, can be sacred.”<sup>86</sup> Sacred things might also incorporate words, utterances, formulas spoken from the lips of a consecrated individual; in the same way, gestures and movements can be labeled as such, as they are performed by the designated or special person.<sup>87</sup> For Price-Mars, as his biographer Magdaline Shannon clarifies:

Religious sentiment, when stripped of its enriching symbolism, was reduced ineluctably to a mass of rules that had to be observed in order to obtain present or future happiness, whether such happiness was derived from within oneself or from one or more spiritual beings who watched over one.<sup>88</sup>

In conclusion, Price-Mars’s philosophy of religion and his discourse on the nature of belief are inclusivistic in orientation; they are generous enough to affirm and integrate all faiths, all religious manifestations and spirituality: theistic and non-theistic, Christian and non-Christian traditions. The implications of Price-Mars’s religious thought for contemporary dialogue on religion and ethics are critical. First, he challenges us to do more constructive ecumenical and interfaith dialogues in order to arrive at an inter-cultural understanding of religion and the varieties of religious experiences. In this regard, he has called us also to support religious diversity in our society. Second, Price-Mars’s perspective on religious morality interrogates contemporary rigid views on religious ethics. Particularly, he has invited us students of religion to consider a “soft” view of morality that rejects absolute claims of truth for relative truth, and moral absolutism for moral relativism. As he himself declares in this statement: “The Church

---

<sup>86</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 37.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-8.

<sup>88</sup> Shannon, 67-8.

knows well that she does not have a monopoly of miracles in the category of celebrated, unexpected, and inexplicable recoveries.”<sup>89</sup> Third, his liberal mind would not allow him to view human dynamics and beliefs expressed through varieties of religious discourses from one singular lens and to judge them from one criterion of values. Finally, Price-Mars’s philosophy of religion and reflections on the nature of belief might be summarized in his clarion call for an inclusive tolerance of all faiths and a liberal standpoint on ethics. This is unmistakable in his reasoning in the closing paragraph below:

In fact, if we were less willing to consider ‘our morality *as the* morality,’ we should see that primitive societies are restrained by a very narrow code of constraints and obligations, all of a religious origin which, by their extensive application, dominate the private and public life and express in the clearest fashion that these societies have morality.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 163.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.