



The Christian Way through the Black Experience

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The substance of Black American Christianity differs radically from that of white Americans in spite of many similarities in their respective forms. Unfortunately the occasional visits of white Americans to black churches fail to provide an adequate means for discerning this difference. Like strangers everywhere such visitors usually tend to give their attention to those things that appear to be continuities of experience, such as similarities in orders of worship, music, prayers, preaching, and the like. Nevertheless, white visitors are likely to discern various differences of style usually evidenced in the rhythm of the music, the cadence of the preaching, the content of the prayers, and the responsive spirit of the congregation. Yet none of this clearly displays the substantial difference about which we speak, because the forms of worship only partially disclose the content of the black Christian experience. That which is concealed is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the race and not readily available to the outside world. In the center of that consciousness resides the soul of black Americans. Thus it was necessary for blacks to modify those liturgical forms borrowed from the religious experience of white Americans in order to make them adequate vehicles for expressing their peculiar spiritual strivings. In other words, the differences in the rhythm, styles, and spirit of black worship services represent the struggles of black people to express the substance of their faith in indigenous cultural forms.

This revisionist process resulted in new forms of worship peculiarly adept for expressing the souls of black people in their efforts to offer praises to that sacred reality in which they discovered the ultimate meaning of their lives both as individuals and as a race. These forms not only expressed the way in which the race was united with the sacred in some supra-historical manner, but, simultaneously, they also functioned as indicators of the race's societal condition and its struggles for liberation. Further, these forms enabled the race to invoke the power of the sacred as an ally in their opposition to oppression and the source of hope for their deliverance.

It must be noted, however, that during the first 150 years of slavery blacks rejected Christianity because they considered it to be the religion of their slave masters. Their rejection was rooted in an African henotheism that acknowledged the reality of gods apart from the specific one(s) that claimed a people's devotion. More specifically, their rejection of Christianity reflected the African understanding that a people's religion is synonymous with their life. That is to say, different styles of life implied different religions and vice versa. Strangers and/or enemies always represented strange ways of life (i.e., religion) which mayor may not be hostile. Nevertheless, it was self-evident to all slaves that in their experience the life/religion of slave

masters was the paramount evil.

One further thing must be said about the African world view. Their understanding of religion as synonymous with life implied the sacred nature of all life and hence their total inability either to understand or appreciate the western notion of secularization. In short, the slaves viewed the life/religion of the slave master as a consistent systemic whole, and consequently they saw no conflict between the slave master's devotion in church and his or her vicious cruelties perpetrated daily on those in bondage. Our interpretation here differs from that of many (slaves, ex-slaves, and scholars) who have described a dichotomy between the slave-master's profession of Christianity and many of the cruel methods employed for maintaining the slave system. We contend that either they have not fully grasped the logic of the African world view and its implications for the slave condition, or they have found it politically expedient not to appear overly critical of the practice of Christianity lest they be misunderstood and thought to be anti-Christian. Such a fear clearly prompted the notable ex-slave abolitionist leader, Frederick Douglass, to write an appendix to his explosive essay, "Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ,"¹ in which he excoriated slaveholding religion with all the literary force he could muster. Since he assumed that normative religious value attended the term "Christian," he chose to interpret the slave-master's religion as an exercise in hypocrisy and deception:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels....The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master.

¹The essay is printed in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University, 1985) 104-109.

Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. The dealers in the bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and

hell presenting the semblance of paradise.²

Slave narratives are replete with descriptions of the disrespect the slaves exhibited towards the master's religion and especially on those occasions when they were forced to sit in segregated areas to receive the owner's instruction regarding the natural state of slavery and its biblical foundations. The autobiography of Peter Randolph typifies the disposition of slaves on this matter:

The colored people had a very small place allotted them to sit in, so they used to get as near the window as they could to hear the preacher talk to his congregation. But, sometimes, while the preacher was exhorting to obedience, some of those outside would be selling refreshments, cake, candy and rum, and others would be horse-racing. This was the way, my readers, the Word of God was delivered and received in Prince George County. The Gospel was so mixed with slavery, that the people could see no beauty in it, and feel no reverence for it....The like of this is the preaching, and these are the men that spread the Gospel among the slaves. Ah! such a Gospel had better be buried in oblivion, for it makes more heathens than Christians.³

The basic tenets of the so-called "slave-holding gospel" were fourfold: (a) that the Bible admonishes slaves to obey their masters; (b) that slave ideas of freedom are signs of the devil's temptation; (c) that both patience in their work and punishments for laxity are pleasing in God's sight; and (d) that forgiveness for wrongdoing lay with God and the slave master.

It must be emphasized, however, that the rejection of slaveholding Christianity did not imply that the slave was bereft of religion. As we have noted above, the African world view would have prohibited such a possibility. On the contrary, the religious perspective of the slave was nurtured and promoted in various secret gatherings that were basically subversive in nature because in those meetings an alternative understanding of the Christian gospel was born, nurtured, celebrated and proclaimed.

Not being allowed to hold meetings in the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamps, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot. Arrangements are then made for conducting the exercises. They first ask each other how they feel, the state of their minds, etc. The male members then select a certain space in separate

²Ibid., 104-105.

³Peter Randolph, "Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible," *Afro-American Religious History*, ed. M. Sernett, 64.

groups, for their division of the meeting. Preaching in order, by the brethren; then praying and singing all round, until they generally feel quite happy....The slave forgets all his sufferings except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming, "Thank God, I shall not live here always!" Then they pass from one to

another, shaking hands, and bidding each other farewell, promising, should they meet no more on earth, to strive and meet in heaven, where all is joy, happiness and liberty. As they separate, they sing a parting hymn of praise....Most of the songs used in worship are composed by the slaves themselves and describe their own sufferings.⁴

The condition of slavery was characterized by immense suffering, and the threat of death was always imminent. Both the form and substance of those secret meetings attended to that reality, and they aimed at cultivating the spirit of endurance by keeping hope alive in a situation (poetically described by James Weldon Johnson) “when hope unborn had died.”⁵

W. E. B. DuBois called the slave songs “Sorrow Songs” because they focused so much on the condition of suffering from which they desired liberation in their present life, the fullness of which they were certain in the life hereafter. These songs, more accurately called “The Spirituals,” have been bequeathed to America as the slaves’ legacy and they tell the story of suffering and triumph, of endurance and transcendence, of history and eternity. Written by “unknown bards” of long ago, they contain the substance of slave religion (i.e., the slave’s life). Wrought in the secret meetings of the hush-harbors and swamps bordering many plantations, they represent the spiritual strivings of an oppressed people held in bondage for three and one-half centuries. But the contemporary descendants of the slaves still find these songs meaningful because racial oppression has continued to be the race’s lot down to the present day.

Black American Christians are convinced that the substance of slave religion is the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ—a gospel that was corrupted and rejected by the personal and societal practice of slaveholding. This authentic gospel centers on the parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples under God. Since kinship implies the equality of persons in community, the kinship of all peoples under God implies God’s opposition to those who threaten or destroy the equality of God’s people. This Christian vision was born in slavery, protected in the so-called “invisible churches” that emerged in the secret meetings of the slaves, and later institutionalized in the Black Church Independence Movement which began among freed slaves immediately following the American War of Independence. This authentic gospel (i.e., slave religion) we call the Black Christian Tradition.⁶

Even though the slaves were forbidden to learn how to read and write, and in spite of the specific biblical teaching they received from their slaveholders, they nevertheless perceived an alternative gospel in the biblical sources. This new gospel which they enthusiastically embraced portrayed God

⁴Ibid., 66.

⁵See James Weldon Johnson’s *Lift Every Voice and Sing* which has been the N.A.A.C.P.’s national anthem throughout this century.

⁶A more complete analysis of this tradition is found in the author’s recent publication, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

as the Liberator of all oppressed peoples and opposed to all who are bent on maintaining oppressive social systems. Henceforth this God has constituted the ultimate grounding for Black America’s fundamental understanding of human nature and, whenever possible, black Americans

have set themselves to the task of institutionalizing this viewpoint as the fundamental principle of their associational life. In fact, black American Christians have formed no associations apart from the dominant presence of this principle. That is to say, black American Christians neither maintain nor promote any associations that are based on a racist principle. In this respect, the black American churches have made a unique contribution to American history. Unlike any institutions in the larger white society, black churches have made a non-racist principle the center of their associational life. No white institutions in this country can claim a similar history. Rather, in some time or place all white institutions have had racism as a principle of their associational life.

We must note, however, that whenever blacks become racist either in attitude or practice, they betray the Black Christian Tradition and thereby self-consciously set themselves in opposition to it. By doing so they alienate themselves from the dominant ethos in the black community and, consequently, they rarely attract sufficient support to remain active for very long.

Faithfulness to the Black Christian Tradition has constituted a constructive force in the history of black Americans. On the one hand, it has saved blacks from falling victims to fatalism and despair, while on the other hand it has given them theological grounds for the expectation that suffering will not last always because God is on their side, desirous of their liberation. Expectation enables a people to dream of possible alternative worlds. All of this was implicit in the great "I Have a Dream" speech of Martin Luther King, Jr., this century's most celebrated embodiment of the Black Christian Tradition.

The substance of the Christian way for black Americans (i.e., the Black Christian Tradition) is expressed primarily in two institutional types which often combine to form a third: (a) churches in which the dominant ethos is that of praising God (i.e., "Praising God Churches"); and (b) churches in which the dominant ethos is that of protesting against racism (i.e., "Protest Churches"). These types are not mutually exclusive, certain sociological theories notwithstanding.⁷ Nevertheless, the logic of each type implies that the other is secondary in importance. But we contend that these types are not antithetical but, instead, complementary. That is to say, the strength of the one represents the weakness of the other. Further, neither repudiates the dominant emphasis of the other. Since each tends to be correlated with an economic class factor, general avoidance of each other frequently characterizes their relationship. From time to time various sociological factors provide the occasion for these types to become significantly united in institutions that we call "Mixed Churches."

⁷E. Franklin Frazier, Benjamin Mays, and others have explained black churches as products of socioeconomic forces. Accordingly, in their views the lower economic class is reflected in the "Praising God Churches" while the "Protest Churches" represent the middle class. Further, these sociologists have tended to view religion as the preserve of the former type and the middle class as evolving away from religion towards a humanism represented in a self-conscious orientation to political matters.

Many of the major historic black congregations in large urban centers exhibit this character. The following comprise three of numerous prominent examples: Abyssinia Baptist Church in Harlem (long pastored by Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.); Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta (the locus of the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr.); and Olivet Baptist

Church in Chicago (still pastored by the renowned Joseph H. Jackson who held the presidency of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., for twenty-nine controversial years).

As stated above, it is the nature of the Black Christian Tradition to seek embodiment in associations and institutions. In the context of slavery the conditions were not present for legitimate associations among slaves, so the latter responded by organizing secret meetings. Although these clandestine gatherings frequently aided and abetted the efforts of many to escape from slavery, their primary purpose was that of celebrating the goodness of God and encouraging one another through these supportive communities in which the principal activities were praying, preaching, singing, and testifying. Clearly, these meetings concentrated on serving the intra-associational needs of the members by strengthening their moral and spiritual capacities. Thus these meetings aimed at the cultivation of moral virtues and spiritual devotion, the acquisition of which was thought to result from the inspiration received from regular attendance and participation in these gatherings. This objective has continued to characterize the ethos of those black churches whose members are daily threatened by the devastating constraints of poverty, racism, and psychological and social alienation. Those whose lives are being constantly diminished need the moral support derived from being closely related to others in like circumstances. The character of this ministry is largely communal in nature, and the people are helped and sustained by one another as they all seek to develop the capacity to face personal suffering in a constructive way. Acts of praying, singing, and testifying manifest signs of the transcendent spirit that overcomes adversity. This community attributes its life to the grace of God, and hence it never ceases “praising God.”

Not surprisingly, the spirit of these “Praising God Churches” provides the moral and spiritual foundation for the “Protest Churches” which, in turn, have more resources of education and finance with which to launch protests against those societal forces of racism that afflict all blacks in varying degrees of intensity but more especially those who are exceedingly poor. The mutual interdependence and cooperation of both of these church types was graphically demonstrated in the mass rallies of the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. On those occasions the atmosphere was continuously charged with the testimonies and prayers of the faithful, the moving beauty of the spirituals, the guttural exuberance of the gospels, and the persuasive oratory of dynamic preaching. These provided the means whereby blacks were woven together into a harmonious whole imbued with a common mission which they zealously affirmed. Thus folk artists and professional musicians, civil rights leaders and welfare recipients, movie stars and rural farmers, poor people and middle class folk sang, prayed, joined hands, and marched together in their quest for a racially just social order. And in that moment many whites joined with blacks and thereby expressed their belief in and commitment to the struggle for a common humanity.

The substance of the Black Christian Tradition embodied in the black churches and various organizations in the black community seeks embodiment in the public institutions of the larger society. That goal constitutes the continuing mission of the black churches and all who join them in total commitment to the task of constructing a social order in which racism has no reality.