"MAD WITH SUPERNATURAL JOY": ON REPRESENTATIONS OF PENTECOSTALISM IN THE BLACK RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

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Abstract

This article examines three distinctive impressions of Pentecostalism within the black religious imagination: Zora Neale Hurston, who engages Pentecostalism as primal African spirituality within the New World context; James Baldwin, whose representation of Pentecostalism focuses on the religious performativity and theatricality of the tradition; and Ithiel Conrad Clemmons, who argues for Pentecostalism as religious innovation, with much to teach the broader religious community about the importance of religious experience in the doing of theology. Hurston, Baldwin, and Clemmons being deeply ensconced in the complexity of black life and black religious culture, critique as well as affirm the power of the Pentecostal experience for individuals and their larger communities.

"[W]hen the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with supernatural joy, [this] was the last essential of Negro religion and the one more devoutly believed in than all the rest ... without this visible manifestation of the God there could be no true communion with the Invisible."[48]

Early Impressions of Pentecostalism

Various elements of Pentecostalism as practiced by African Americans in the United States have received a fair share of attention in print literature over the past one hundred years. These references and interpretations have primarily been the writings of journalists, sociologists, religious historians, anthropologists, and others lacking firsthand knowledge of the tradition. Prior to any scholarly engagement of the tradition, the first recorded depictions of Black Pentecostalism were the characterizations and caricaturizations of journalist and newspaper reporters. These journalistic ethnographers captured the birth and

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[48] W.E.B DuBois, *Souls of Black Folks* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 134.

immediate aftermath of the Azusa Street Revival, which for many represents the mythic origins of the modern Pentecostal awakening. Birthed in an African American congregation in a Los Angeles ghetto, this local revival later spawned an international movement. These early chroniclers, themselves products of American racist ideology, in their reporting captured what they deemed as the bizarre and grotesque elements of this revival. By focusing on the religious frenzy, playing up racial stereotypes, and detailing transgressions of American racial, cultural and social mores, these reporters ultimately painted the African Americans who led and participated in this movement in a less than favorable light. Examples of this can be seen in two separate accounts from the *Los Angeles Times*, at the height of the revival in 1906:

> Meetings are held in a tumble-down shack on Azusa Street, and the devotees of the weird doctrine practice the most fanatical rites, preach the wildest theories and work themselves into a state of mad excitement in their peculiar zeal. Colored people and a sprinkling of whites compose the congregation, and night is made hideous in the neighborhood by the howlings of the worshippers, who spend hours swaying forth and back in a nerve-racking attitude of prayer and supplication. They claim to have the "gift of tongues" and be able to understand the babel.[49]

In addition to disparaging the worshippers, a September 1906 account attacks the African American leadership of the movement. Calling the movement a "disgraceful intermingling of the races," a local newspaper reporter further states that these early Pentecostals:

> cry and make howling noises all day and into the night. They run, jump, shake all over, shout to the top of their voice, spin around in circles, fall out on the sawdust blanketed floor jerking, kicking and rolling all over it. Some of them pass out and do not move for hours as though they were dead. These people appear to be mad, mentally deranged or under a spell. They claim to be filled with the spirit. They have a one-eyed, illiterate, Negro as their preacher who stays on his knees much of the time with his head hidden between the wooden milk crates. He doesn't talk very much, but at times he can be heard shouting, 'Repent,' and he's supposed to be running the

[49]"Weird Babel of Tongues," Los Angeles Times Daily, April 18, 1906.

thing...they repeatedly sing the same song, 'The Comforter Has Come.'[50]

These early printed accounts in both newspapers and periodicals both biased and prejudiced the early social scientific accounts of the fledgling (though soon to be burgeoning) religious movement, often leading to wholesale and categorical dismissals of both Black Pentecostals and the distinctive elements of their religious traditions.

Early Scholarly Observations

Immediately following the early journalistic accounts and their caricaturizations of the African American Pentecostal experience, the first scholars to critically examine this tradition were those trained within the fields of sociology and anthropology.[51] Operating mainly from empirical epistemologies and employing the methods of the social sciences, by virtue of their training and modes of analysis, being preoccupied with the so-called "negro problem," these scholars showed very little interest in religious meaning. Seeking instead to discover what could be learned about cultural and social patterns in African American life, these early studies were particularly interested in the transformation of American religion and the attendant dynamics of black culture, migration, and urbanization.

Because of a lack of sensitivity to differences in theological beliefs, a significant problem attending these early social-scientific examinations was the tendency to situate and to interpret Pentecostalism within the sociological taxonomy of urban sects and cults rather than view the tradition as an institutional expression of American Christianity. By interpreting Pentecostalism within this strictly social-scientific gaze, these Pentecostals were often interpreted through theories of deprivation, anomie, millenarianism, and thus were dismissed as otherworldly, apolitical and socially disengaged.

Recent Developments and Alternative Representations

Within the past few decades, as the movement expanded within African American communities across the nation, more sophisticated

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[50]Jack Hayford, *The Charismatic Century: The Enduring Impact of the Azusa Street Revival* (Warner Faith Books, 2006), 77.

[51]These scholars include: Elmer T. Clark; Robert Mapes Anderson; and Sydney Ahlstrom.

interpretations of the tradition emerge by those who seriously engage in the study of both black religion and culture. These more nuanced and informed perspectives create a discursive space for interpreters of black religion from both inside and outside of the Pentecostal tradition; allowing those within the tradition to share their own stories and allowing informed outsiders to offer keen insights. This paper argues for three distinctive representations of Pentecostalism in the black religious imagination: 1) the outsider, Zora Neale Hurston, the folklorist and cultural anthropologist, represents Pentecostalism, or the sanctified church, in her writings as primal African spirituality within the New World context. 2) literary and cultural theorist, and former insider, James Baldwin, provides us with a representation of Pentecostalism that is focused on the religious performativity and theatricality of the tradition. 3) and finally, Ithiel Conrad Clemmons, Pentecostal pastor and theologian, and reflective insider represent Pentecostalism as religious innovation, with much to teach the broader Christian community about the importance of religious experience in the doing of theology. Hurston, Baldwin, and Clemmons are able to give sophisticated accounts of the "supernatural joy" experienced by Pentecostal believers, which earlier outside observers often dismissed as "madness." All three, being deeply ensconced in the complexity of black life and black religious culture, critique as well as affirm the power of the Pentecostal experience for individuals and their broader communities. And while their particular insider/outsider statuses, as well as their religious backgrounds and academic training, provide different interpretations of the tradition, all three thinkers affirm the dynamic, powerful and multivalent meanings of Pentecostalism within the black religious imagination.

"Old Gods by New Names": Pentecostalism as Continuation of African Religion

Perhaps one of the earliest scholars to comment upon the religious and cultural significance of African American Pentecostalism in both American religious life and culture is that of folklorist and cultural anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. A student of renowned German-American cultural anthropologist Franz Boas considered the father of both American and modern anthropology, Hurston would devote her studies of religion, folklore, and anthropology to the cultural practices of African-descended peoples in the Americas. Though reared within the all-black township of Eatonville, Florida and describing herself as one "born with

God in the house,"[52] it was from Boas and her other social-scientific tutors that Hurston would acquire and begin to employ what she once called the "spy-glass of Anthropology."[53] It was through the lens of anthropology that she would interpret various aspects of African diasporan religious life in the Americas.

Though much has been written concerning Hurston's intrigue with African retentions in the religious lives of the descendants of Africa in the Americas focusing primarily on her writings regarding Voodoo, Caribbean religions, conjuring traditions, folk religion and that which she called hoodoo beliefs, much less has been made of her reflections on African survivals within African American Christianity. Though Hurston herself was the daughter of a Baptist minister, as it relates to her writings on Afro-Protestant religious practices, she would relegate her anthropological observations to the shared ecumenical experiences of the conversion narratives, the call narratives, and the preaching traditions. However, it was in her research into African American Pentecostalism, the tradition which she called the sanctified church that would lead her to the conclusion that "the negro has not been Christianized as extensively as is believed. The great masses are still standing before their pagan altar and calling old gods by new names."[54] In as much as Hurston understood the tradition as having tapped into primal African spirituality and managed to remain unencumbered by the burden of black respectability and the gaze of whiteness, Hurston would provide an interpretation of Black Pentecostalism as both an essentially African and radically Re-Africanizing religious tradition.

In her anthropological writings dating back as early as 1926, Hurston would discuss the sanctified church as a highly distinctive form of both African religion (and to a lesser extent, American Christianity), and in doing so, would point to the need for further reflection upon the tradition. According to Hurston, "the rise of various groups of saints in America in the last twenty years is not the appearance of a new religion as has been reported. It is, in fact, the older forms of Negro religious expression asserting themselves against the new."[55] Seeing African American Pentecostalism as the return of the repressed in New World African spirituality, Hurston would argue that one of the geniuses of this tradition is that it functions as "a protest against the high-brow tendency in

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[52]Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on the R*oad (Philadelphia: JB Lippincott, 1942), 266.
[53]Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Publishers, 1935), 1.
[54]Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified* Church (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981), 103.
[55]Ibid.

Negro Protestant congregations as the Negroes gain more education and wealth." [56] In further lodging Black Pentecostalism within African indigenous spirituality, Hurston would go as far as saying that in the ecstasy-filled worship experience, the worshiping Pentecostal "congregation is restored to its primitive altars under the new name of Christ."[57]

Hurston, working to counter the conventional perceptions that Black religious expression needed to be respectable, that is – to fit within white liturgical standards and structures – emphasizes the distinctive nature of black religious rituals when blacks refrain from religious performance under the gaze of whiteness. Hurston both locates and appreciates the more authentic spiritual praxis in these highly segregated worship spaces.

But not only for Hurston was Pentecostalism understood as a clear continuation of indigenous African religion in America, she would also see within the Pentecostal tradition the potential and power to re-Africanize other forms and traditions of African American music and spirituality. Seeing Black Pentecostal spirituality as a possessing and "revitalizing element in Negro music and religion" for Hurston the tradition's power rested in the spirituality's potential for: "putting back into Negro religion those elements which were brought over from Africa and grafted onto Christianity as soon as the Negro came in contact with [white religion], but which are being rooted out as the American Negro [sought to assimilate]"[58] Hurston points us to the reality that Africans were introduced to a very particular form of Christianity when they were involuntarily brought to the New World, what Frederick Douglass calls "slaveholding religion."[59] So, in pointing out the continuation of African religious rituals in America, Hurston reminds us that Africans had a vibrant and rich spiritual cosmology before contact with their Christian enslavers.

Understanding the sanctified church as a living and breathing African institution, for Hurston, nowhere was this African and re-Africanizing principle more clearly revealed than in the ritual performance of the 'Holy Dance' or shouting tradition. According to Hurston:

> There can be little doubt that shouting is a survival of the African "possession" by the gods. In Africa it is sacred to the priesthood or

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[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid., 104.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 118.

> acolytes, in America it has become generalized. The implication is the same, however, it is a sign of special favor from the spirit that it chooses to drive out the individual consciousness temporarily and use the body for its expression."[60]

Seeing the sanctified shout as "nothing more than a continuation of the African "possession" by the gods," according to Hurston:

> The gods possess the body of the worshipper, and he or she is supposed to know nothing of their actions until the god decamps. This is still in most Negro Protestant churches [but] is universal in the Sanctified churches. They protest against the more highbrow churches' efforts to stop it.[61]

While Hurston highlights the ecstatic bodily practice of shouting, she also, more importantly. draws our attention to ways in which the sanctified church consciously resisted Western religious domination. In allowing their bodies to move in these spaces and in these ways, Pentecostals understood the tradition of holy dancing as both protest and praise. In highlighting this representation of Pentecostalism, Hurston depicts the deeply African and radically Africanizing nature of Black Pentecostal religious ritual. This influence would be felt in other Afro-Protestant congregations as time would evolve.

In light of Hurston's observations, many scholars would begin to consider the significance of Pentecostalism within American Christianity; to ponder the relationship between Black Pentecostalism to African religions, and to take seriously the sanctified church as a highly distinctive institutional expression of American religion and culture. It is within the writings of James Baldwin that we can see an even fuller representation of Pentecostalism operating within the African American imagination.

"No Drama like the Drama of the Saints Rejoicing": Black Pentecostalism as Religious Performance

Complementing the representation of the Sanctified Church as African religion offered by Hurston, and further complicating the power and beauty of that tradition, the celebrated African American literary and cultural theorist, James Baldwin also attends to Black Pentecostalism as a

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[60]Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 91.
[61]Ibid., 104.

neglected, yet powerful cultural and religious trajectory in American life. Like Hurston, whose father was a Baptist minister, Baldwin would receive his earliest religious instruction from his step-father, a Baptist minister in New York City. Though Baldwin would spend his early childhood years in his father's church, it was during the summer of his fourteenth birthday that according to Baldwin, he "underwent a prolonged religious crisis [and] discovered God, His saints and angels, and His blazing Hell." [62] It was at this time, through a dramatic religious conversion, that young Baldwin was taken hold of by the fires of Black Pentecostal religion, and for three years he would become a member and an associate minister of a small Pentecostal congregation in Harlem. Of his time within this tradition, Baldwin would later write, that he grew up "in the shadow of the Holy Ghost."[63] And it was under the shadow of the Spirit that Baldwin, now an intimate insider, would become one of Black Pentecostalism's greatest admirers and one of its harshest critics.

Named by one of his critics as "America's inside eye on the Black Holiness-Pentecostal churches,"[64] Baldwin's writings would expose the world to the very inner life of this tradition by exposing the moral, cultural and theological worlds inhabited by those who dwelled within her gates, and the ways in which this religion was actively performed by those who believed. Beginning with the 1953 publication of his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin would expose a wider, largely secular, audience to Black Pentecostal beliefs and practices including the "tarrying" prayer tradition, the tradition of holy dancing, and the moral imperatives of the holiness codes, which served as guides for the faithful in their quests to live "in the world, but not of the world." By consciously highlighting these particular practices, Baldwin emphasized both the percussive and performative nature of Black Pentecostal spirituality; thus providing us with yet another window into how Pentecostalism was envisioned within the black religious imagination.

As it relates to Baldwin's conscious representation of Pentecostalism as a dynamic cultural and religious theater, in the introductory notes to his 1954 theatrical debut, *The Amen Corner*, Baldwin reveals to his readership the logic undergirding his very conscious depiction of Pentecostalism as religious performance. In efforts of

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[62]James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell Press, 1963), 10.

[63]Fred R. Standley and Louis H. Pratt, *Conversations with James Baldwin* (University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 106.

[64] Ithiel Clemmons, *C.H. Mason and the Roots of the Church of God in Christ* (Bakersfield: Pneuma Life Publishers, 1996), vii.

shedding light upon his creative process while simultaneously bearing witness to the drama that is Black Pentecostal ritual performance, Baldwin would say of his corpus:

> I was armed, I knew, in attempting to write...by the fact that I was born in the church. I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of theater, the *communion* which is the theater. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theater was to recreate moments I remembered as a boy preacher, to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up, and hopefully, to change them.[65]

Drawing upon memories of his ministerial participation in the Sanctified church of his youth, Baldwin's literary musings on Pentecostalism sought to recreate both the drama and the communion of the Black Pentecostal worship experience. By depicting scenes of religious dancing, weeping, tarrying prayers, and other ecstatic liturgical gestures, Baldwin draws attention to both the individual and the corporate function of ritual performance within the Black Pentecostal tradition. While the singular individual may dance or rejoice, he or she is affirmed and supported by other cast members involved in the liturgical drama, who often join in with their acts of worship. Employing the language of phenomenology in his thick descriptions, Baldwin provides his readers with a hermeneutic, or lens of interpretation, for understanding the performance of Black Pentecostal worship.

In a graphic worship scene in the very first chapter of *Go Tell It on The Mountain*, Baldwin provides his readers with a critical gaze into both the context (theater) and event (production) of Black Pentecostal worship. As the scene unfolds, Elisha, the congregation's musician and friend of the young protagonist is overcome by the sacred while furnishing music for an all-night prayer meeting. Upon being seized by the Spirit and entering into what appears to be a state of ecstasy, Elisha, who initially played a supporting role in the production, now temporarily becomes the main character. Baldwin seeks to capture both the intensity and dynamism of the moment with meticulous detail as he explains:

> He struck on the piano one last, wild note, and threw up his hands, palms upward, stretched wide apart. The tambourines raced to fill the vacuum left by the silent piano, and his cry drew answering

[65]James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner* (New York: Dial Press, 1954), xviii.

> cries. Then he was on his feet, turning, blind, his face congested, contorted with this rage, and the muscles leaping and swelling in his long, dark neck. It seemed that he could not breathe, that his body could not contain his passion, that he would be, before their eyes, dispersed into the waiting air. His hands, rigid to the very fingertips moved outward and back against his hips, his sightless eyes looked upward, and he began to dance. Then his hands closed into fists, and his head snapped downward, his sweat loosening the grease that slicked down his hair; and the rhythm of all others quickened to match Elisha's rhythm; his thighs moved terribly against the cloth of his suit, his heels beat on the floor, and his fists moved beside his body as though he were beating his own drum. And so, for a while, in the center of the dancers, head down, fists beating, on, on, unbearably, until it seemed the walls of the church would fall for very sound; and then, in a moment, with a cry, head up, arms high in the air, sweat pouring from his forehead, and all his body dancing as though it would never stop...he dropped like some animal felled by a hammer -- moaning, on his face. And then a great moaning filled the church.[66]

With descriptive precision, Baldwin fleshes out the details of this actor in the throes of his performance for the reading audience. We are meant to hear the echoes of the tambourines and see the contortions of Elisha's body in rhythm with the clapping and singing. We are even called upon to imagine the vibrations of the "walls of the church" that may possibly fall as Elisha's body acts like a percussive instrument. Baldwin forces the reader to engage his or her imagination, even as he recreates a primal scene of worship from the Black Pentecostal tradition. We, the readers, become insiders – or actors – in the drama that Baldwin recreates.

Further underscoring the theatrical nature of Black Pentecostal religious performance, and demonstrating the deeply communal nature of the production, in his 1963 publication, *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin writes of his own experience within the tradition. Though having been disengaged from the tradition for some time, he continues to extol the beauty, significance and the indelible imprint left upon him by the tradition when he writes:

> there is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and

[66]James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 15-16.

> all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord. I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, would fill a church, causing the church...to rock. Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, the "Word" when the church and I were one. Their pain and joy were mine, and mine was theirs – they surrendered their pain and joy to me. I surrendered mine to them – and their cries of "Amen!" and "Hallelujah" and "Yes, Lord!" and "Praise His name!" and "Preach it, brother!" sustained and whipped on my solos until we all became equal, wringing wet, singing and dancing, in anguish and rejoicing, at the foot of the altar.[67]

Highlighting the soaring drama and moments of deep intensity within the worship experience he knew intimately, Baldwin provides the world with a representation of Black Pentecostalism that is inextricably bound with the theatrical. Baldwin's detailed insider accounts, along with his ability to recreate this highly sophisticated moral and religious tapestry that is the African American Pentecostal experience, demonstrated that this tradition both merited and demanded further scholarly attention.

"Beyond Conceptual Language and Proposition": Black Pentecostalism as Religious Innovation

Knowledgeable of both the anthropological insights of Hurston and the literary representations of Baldwin, the late Bishop Ithiel Conrad Clemmons, former Pentecostal minister and scholar from the Church of God in Christ, in both his pastoral and scholarly reflections would seek to provide an expressly theological interpretation of African American Pentecostalism. Like Hurston and Baldwin before him, Clemmons was also reared in the home of a minister; his father, Frank Clemmons, was a Pentecostal pastor and bishop in Brooklyn, New York. While Hurston was an outsider to the Pentecostal tradition and Baldwin was a former insider who eventually disengages from the tradition, Clemmons was a life-long

[67]Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 33-4.

member, an informed and reflective insider, whose roots in Pentecostalism sustained him from the cradle until the grave. Clemmons, formally trained in the fields of theology and religious history, used his insights to reflect upon the tradition in which he was nurtured and in doing so, we are provided with a representation of Black Pentecostalism as religious innovation.

Grounding his theological perspectives within the critical disciplines of Church history, political theology, and Christian spirituality, Clemmons' distinctive vocation as a pastor-scholar provided him with a unique vantage for interpreting the tongues of his native African-American Pentecostal tradition to his interlocutors in each of the publics he engaged. As a Black Pentecostal theologian with an orientation towards history and Christian mysticism, in his own life and ministry, Clemmons endeavored to discern, embody and bear witness to the unique deposit of faith bequeathed to him by his enslaved African progenitors and his pioneer Black Holiness and Pentecostal forbearers. With his larger theological project critically situated within the religious experiences of New World Africans in the Americas, according to Wilmore, Clemmons' tracing of the activity of the divine in human history was critically aligned with the hierophantic nature of the larger tradition of African religion throughout the diaspora. According to Wilmore, within the wider African diasporan religious experience:

> There [has always been], from the beginning, a fusion between a highly developed and pervasive feeling about the hierophantic nature of historical experience flowing from the African religious past, and a radical and programmatic secularity, related to the experience of slavery and oppression, which constituted the essential and most significant characteristic of Black religion.[68]

Seeing himself as one who sought "to point out the hidden but powerfully present footprints of God in the affairs of [humankind] and nations" [69] Clemmons, according to theologian Harold Dean Trulear, "desired to strengthen the witness of his beloved [tradition] through proffering the spirituality of its founding fathers and mothers as a model

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[68]Gayraud S Wilmore. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 1.

[69]Ithiel Clemmons, "What Price Reconciliation: Reflections on the Memphis Dialogue," in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies 18*, no.1 (1996): 118.

for contemporary ministry."[70] For Clemmons, human history was the arena of divine activity and the faithful would do well "to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered."

This belief that his predecessors had a revelation of the Sacred was central to both Clemmons' historical and theological projects. Having embraced a high view of history and envisioning a constructive theological use for this history, Clemmons asserted that "[t]he recovery of a meaningful [contemporary] faith includes the discovery and the interpretation of God's activity and power in the past and the discernment of how this same activity and power continues today."[71] Believing that the testimonies of his forbearers were crucial to this particular theological enterprise, Clemmons contended that:

> through the use of narrative, the [contemporary] faith community [attempts] to interpret and reinterpret the experiences of its foreparents and interface these interpretations with the contemporary black experience. In this, the faith community attempt[s] to live out its historical faith in the contemporary context.[72]

Any critical reading of Clemmons that takes his scholarship seriously must first contend with his constructive use of history for the purpose of creating a Black Pentecostal spirituality. For Clemmons, retrieval of this early history was crucial for understanding and appreciating what he saw as the innovative dimension of Black Pentecostal experience, that is: *taking seriously the role of religious experience as a point of departure for doing the work of Christian theology.*

Early on in his spiritual and theological development, Clemmons became interested in deepening his understanding of his tradition's spirituality and theology of the Holy Spirit. Clemmons would come to see these aspects of his community's theology as an ecumenical offering from his tradition to the broader church, with potential for opening up new avenues for both doing theology and promoting Christian unity. Realizing that these elements of Pentecostal theology "tended to move in the

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[70] Harold Dean Trulear, "Ithiel C. Clemmons, Bishop C.H. Mason and the Roots of the Church of God in Christ," in *Pneuma: The Journal for the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 21, no 2 (1999), 350.

[71] Ithiel Clemmons, "Shaping the Coming Era of the Church of God in Christ in Eastern New York, First Jurisdiction" (DMin diss., New York Theological Seminary, 1972), 14.

[72] Ibid.

direction of an experiential theology focused on awe, mystery, and wonder," Clemmons would argue that these emphases gave "rise to specific concern with dogma, worship and ritual." [73] As one who consciously understood his Pentecostal faith within the context of the longer history of the Christian Church, Clemmons credited his Pentecostal fore parents for their boldness in safeguarding religious experience as a valid point of entry for doing theology.

In bestowing proper credit to his predecessors for their critical theological insights, Clemmons said that though these sainted mothers and fathers "did not have access to extensive academic opportunities" and "they were bereft of the intellectual tools with which to systemize their spiritual insights into theological discourse, literacy was not a prerequisite to revelation." Clemmons further added, "God gave to them the wisdom to penetrate behind the walls of sophisticated Christian orthodoxy and [t]hey were able to get at and utilize genuine religious experience as a cure for the ills of their day."[74] In defense of their oral theological method, Clemmons maintained that "[a]lthough these elements of faith may [have] appear[ed] to be put together uncritically within the framework of an ethno-religious impulse, this serious engagement of pneumatology occasioned an essential breakthrough within the Christian tradition."[75] This breakthrough for Clemmons was his community's modest ecumenical offering to the wider Christian church.

Seeing within his formative Pentecostal tradition a vibrant ecumenical witness and believing wholeheartedly that "Black Holiness Pentecostalism [possessed] the potential to give [a] much-needed fresh theological articulation to diverse [forms of] spirituality and [to] provide a pneumatology of spontaneity,"[76] Clemmons posited:

> [T]here is little doubt among scholars, church leaders [and] laypersons today that the twentieth-century Pentecostal movement with its emphasis on pneumatology as the point of beginning in doing theology has challenged the traditional patristic, scholastic and protest orthodox theologies to go *beyond conceptual language and proposition to experienced presence.* Pentecostalism has come

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[73] Ibid., 187

[74] Clemmons, "The Recovery of Biblical Holiness Part I: Holiness, The More Excellent Way," audiocassette.

[75] Clemmons, "Shaping the Coming Era," 167.

[76] Ibid., 175.

> across as essentially an experience. This accounts for its potential enrichment of theological reflection and its danger.[77]

In moving beyond conceptual language and propositional thinking as starting points for theological reflection to "experienced presence," Clemmons argued that his tradition's distinctive approach to theological praxis "continues to challenge any approach to theology that is primarily academic rather than experiential."[78] Clemmons saw this as perhaps one of the chief virtues of his community's theology.

On the Ecstasies and Epistemologies of Life: Black Pentecostalism as the Stuff of Artists, Preachers and Story-Tellers

Hurston (outsider), Baldwin, (former-insider) and Clemmons, (reflective-insider) offer three distinct lenses for envisioning Pentecostalism within the Black religious imagination. As an outsider, examining Black Pentecostalism from an anthropological framework, Hurston is keen to connect the "sanctified church" to indigenous African spirituality, even to the extent of questioning and dismissing the tradition's claim to Christianity. Like Baldwin, Hurston highlights both the collective ecstasies of the congregation and the congregants' personal experiences of the sacred. For Hurston, the beauty and virtue of the sanctified church lie in its ability to remain unencumbered by the pressures of Black respectability, oblivious to the white gaze, reconnecting with a grand tradition of African spirit possession, and its potential and power to help re-Africanize other forms of new world African spirituality.

Baldwin, a former insider, envisions Black Pentecostalism as a theater of the sacred. In this theater, worshipping black bodies are drawn together, through the experience of the Holy Spirit, into the religious performance. With greater interest in aesthetics than Hurston, Baldwin emphasizes the beauty of Black Holiness worship, whose elegance could rival that of the theaters of ancient Greece. In the experience of the sacred for Baldwin, worshippers stand outside of themselves, and being overwhelmed by the holy, constitute an extemporaneous liturgical drama.

For Clemmons, who understands himself as both an informed and reflective insider, interpreting Pentecostalism from the standpoint of

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[77] Ibid., 173.

[78] Ibid., 174.

Christian pneumatology allows him to envision the encounter of the Spirit as the moment of revelation. Like Hurston, Clemmons also sees this moment as tied to the African past, through the deeply moving religious experiences of his enslaved African fore-bearers and their faith in the Almighty sovereign God who sustained them during the hell of American slavery. For Clemmons, this African past has been Christianized and sanctified, thus allowing the worshipper to experience the awe, mystery, and wonder of the Christian God. Clemmons sees this theology of "experienced presence" as innovative for Christian unity and theology today.

As this paper attempts to demonstrate, in the African American religious imagination, Pentecostalism is envisioned as being concerned with: spirit (both Holy Spirit and/or ancestral spirits); materiality (both collective and individual bodies); and claims to experience and revelation. Though the three figures I have chosen speak from different angles as it relates to their positionality to the tradition, each one is keen to affirm the ecstatic as a way of knowing and experiencing transcendence (or something greater and beyond themselves) in the varying contexts and rhythms of life. Moreover, representations of Pentecostalism are not confined to practitioners and scholars of religion, but they envision a much wider human community. As a subject of critical human inquiry, Pentecostalism provides for Hurston, Baldwin, and Clemmons, windows for understanding life, the very stuff of life, the way life is to be lived, loved, shared, celebrated, and given. As a source for religious, artistic, and cultural innovation, Black Pentecostalism continues to provide artists, storytellers, and preachers with the source material for their narratives of faith, suffering, struggle, and hope. And it is in this sense alone that the power and beauty of Black Pentecostal fire yet makes its adherents *mad with supernatural joy.*

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