

# THE SOCIAL COSMOS OF BLACK ECUMENISM

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### Abstract

*This essay suggests that Black sectarianism, i.e., the establishment of various Black denominations, disrupts the development of Black ecumenism. The author claims that although religion “provides the prime cohesiveness for the black community...it is in the variety of black denominations that the fracture of the black community is most prominently institutionalized.” Black ecumenism, in order to be successful, must “draw upon the black experience as interpreted by black ethnicity.” The concept of Black ethnicity “presupposes the primacy of spiritual values from the outset, and sees every black Christian as potentially and properly a member of a single confraternity defined by faith, and shaped by experience.” Yet, it denies the justification of Black sectarianism because the differences between the denominations are arbitrary and contrived. Black ecumenism suggests that Black solidarity is the “logical fruit of the black experience, and that whatever negates this unity is a distortion of history and a continuing detriment to the black estate.”*

Prior to World War II, the black sub-culture had been in stolid isolation from the rest of the country for as long as Blacks had been in America. The black world

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was a cosmos apart, seldom penetrated from the outside except by the white mercantilists, and largely left to the development of its own cultural profile through the instrumentality of its own peculiar devices. The organizing matrix was the Black Church, which, curiously enough, had never been one church but many, and ecumenism had never been a salient feature of the black experience.

Things have changed. The contemporary black community is bombarded by a threatening array of forces in the form of ideas and values as well as the more traditional economic interests. The penetrations are disturbing, to say the least, for they not only compromise the cultural integrity of the culture and its more salient institutions, they threaten the Black American cosmos itself. I take it that the recognition of this fact is what calls this conference on black ecumenism into being. A conference on black ecumenism would seem to presuppose at least four assumptions:

1. Blacks are in certain significant ways separated and distinguished from whites.
2. Blacks are separated and distinguished from each other.
3. There is a religious quotient common to all, which is believed to transcend separation.
4. The present interest is limited to the rectification of black separation, and this interest may be defined as "the problem."

To address this problem in a manner that may suggest some ways of dealing with it effectively, it will be helpful to put it in perspective, which implies a certain way of interpreting the environment in which the problem is seen to lie. This in turn, requires a brief excursus into the social history of the black experience in America, which supplies the environmental construct from which the problem in fact derives. In short, like so many other

problems which continue to challenge the normative aspirations of black people, and which continue to modify their relations with white people, the root issues of black ecumenism are buried in slavery – that “peculiar institution,” which did more than any combination of other social factors to define life in America for countless generations after its legal demise. *Cherche la femme?* In France, perhaps, but in America, *Cherche le bondage*.

Since the motivation, which generated and fueled the African slave trade was economic rather than cultural or genealogical, the men and women who took ship as cargo in West Africa and landed as chattels in Baltimore and Charleston, were a diverse population. The Ibo and Mandinka, the Asante and the Ga, the Ewe, Hausa, Wolof, Yoruba, Fon, Fanti, Fulani, along with an undetermined number of tribal groups were for more than 200 years the involuntary sources of the West African diaspora in America. These were not the people of a single tribe, or a single culture, or a single ethnic group. Although they were sometimes members of the same clan, such as the Akan family of tribes, for example, they were for the most part distinctive peoples of distinctive languages and cultural traditions. The common denominator which brought them to America was that they were black and African at a moment in history when that peculiar combination satisfied the popular formula for the resolution of the labor needs of the European adventure on the far side of the Atlantic. Involved in the Atlantic experiment against his will, and under the most distressful circumstances of human bondage ever devised by a civilized people, the African would survive his bondage with his humanity intact, and would find in the experience a compelling affirmation of a new and singular identity. It is that identity that his conference is all about.

The ecumenism pursued by contemporary Blacks is a precipitate of a consciousness of kind, but the context of that consciousness is not in all cases in consensus, because reality differently perceived is a different reality. It is ultimately a question of the perception of identity, but the argument that the Black American must find his basic identity on this side of the slave experience is, I believe, not only in strictest conformance with reality, but crucial to his self-projection and the response of significant others to whom he would choose to relate. At the moment, the single point to be made is that from the dozens of culturally and ethnically diverse African peoples who were macerated in the American crucible of slavery, there came out *one* cultural, ethnic entity: the Black American. This, then, illustrates the first presupposition, and is the point at which the ecumenical quest would seem to begin: the recognition that in the beginning, i.e., the Black American, we were One; and that the One was a new entity born of a unique historical experience; and that this same experience and its derivative influence distinguishes us and separates us from all others who neither share nor value that experience, or who endorse the pejorative intentions which created it in the first place.

It will be objected that if we are "One," one is by definition a perfect unity, thus obviating the need for an ecumenical interest. The painful answer is that the "One" we are fractured. Human experience is the stuff of history, and history is often in contradiction to itself. It is one of the anomalous complexifies of the black experience that at the same time we were being ground into a common grist, we were also being refracted into a spectrum of difference. The net result was a social caste purportedly defined by race, color, ethnic origin and public reputation. Within the caste, personal identity was dependent, first of all, upon the identity of ownership, i.e.,

*whose* slave, and then upon such secondary distinctions as Christian, or Greek, or Roman name, physical description, work assignment, and later, religious affiliation. All of these secondary distinctions with the exception of names, trivial though they may appear at first consideration, have at one time or another been painfully effective in the reduction of group solidarity, and in perpetuating the caste arrangement by the enervation of intra-group hostility and competitiveness. In slavocracy, status is derived from the performance of work directly concerned with the comfort or convenience of the master. Hence, the distinction between Blacks who were "Big House" and Blacks who were field slaves. A related but more pernicious distinction, because it was even more illogical, was based on color. The color issue, too, was rooted in the slave experience and the illogical notion that the blood of the master (or the overseer) ought to have status value in the black community. This odd and contradictory notion was a plague to black togetherness a hundred years after slavery was ended. Indeed, it was not put finally to rest until the Black Revolution of the 1960's. And, possibly not completely so, even then. Nevertheless, if skin color has not been absolutely eliminated as a serious source of intra-group separation, its status value has been markedly diminished by the perceptions of contemporary black ethnicity, for it has never enjoyed any currency except within the group. Unlike "Big House" status, which was indispensable to the maintenance of a patrician class of whites, skin color was limited to an *en caste* value. Outside the caste, dark or fair were merely different shades of black if the basic identity was "Negro."

## **Religion as a Factor of Separation**

It is religion that provides the prime cohesive for the black community, and irony of ironies; it is in religion that the fracture of the black community is most prominently institutionalized. For the first hundred years of the black experience in America, religion was more an index of separation than a factor of integration. Christianity was not yet generally available to the Blacks, and it was the general practice to disperse as widely as possible those slaves known to have a common language or religion to reduce the occasions for revolt or insurrection. But after 1701 the Society of Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.) in Foreign Parts turned its attention to the slaves, who had up to that time been considered "too beastly," "too brutal," "too dull," and "too unlike the English" to warrant any concern about their souls – if indeed they were possessed of such. The Great Awakening gave dramatic impetus to the modest successes of S.P.G., and in the course of time, the Christianization of the black contingent was accomplished. Whether it was the persuasiveness of Christianity, the pervasiveness of Christianity, or merely the absence of spiritual alternatives, the religions brought from Africa, tribal, Muslim, or whatever, were eclipsed, and black identity became inseparable from the Christian faith. In the course of that development, however, Blacks became separated from each other.

## **The Sources of Black Sectarianism**

When Richard Allen and his followers detached themselves from St. George Methodist Church in Philadelphia because of the demeaning racial discrimination which was a condition of their membership there, the Free African Society they founded allowed

them a period of reflection about the direction their commitment to the faith should take next. When it was decided finally that under the circumstances, the faithfulness and dignity of black people could be preserved in a black church, the *kind* of black church, save that it would be “African,” was not an apparent issue. However, it was to *become* an issue of the most critical importance as the movement for a black church gathered momentum, and the dream of religious independence began to take on the substance of reality. However anomalous it may seem that a people who were so recently and so tentatively introduced to the faith, and who had been so grievously and so persistently demeaned in their efforts to share in its fellowship, and however innocent they must have been of the minutia of theological distinction, internal schism was to stalk the Black Church from its founding. It is to the credit of the Free African Society, that courageous little company of religious exiles, that they anticipated the problem and sought to avoid it, at least initially. Benjamin Rush, who described the exiles as “the scattered appendages” of the churches of Philadelphia, also noted that the emergent African Church of Philadelphia had “drawn up articles and a plan of government so general as to embrace all, yet so orthodox in cardinal points as to offend none.” Nevertheless, when in 1791 the sponsors of the African Church met to adopt a plan of government, both Richard Allen and Absalom Jones wanted a Methodist polity, while the majority of other members voted for the Church of England. Jones relinquished his preferences and went on to lead the majority in the founding of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. Richard Allen, on the other hand, informed his erstwhile colleagues that he “could not be anything but Methodist,” and that since he “could go no further with them,” he would “leave them in peace.” The rest is familiar history. Allen went on to found

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Bethel became the “Mother Church” of the first black denomination.

Religions are the stuff of human experience – a precipitate of cultural learnings addressed to what is thought to transcend human experience, and characteristically crystallized in formal creeds, moral requirements and ritual practices. It is probably the ultimate nature of religious concern which tends to encourage a preoccupation with details designed to distinguish probable success from possible failure, especially in a free society where there is neither establishment nor proscription, and where religious experimentation short of blasphemy or the violation of public policy stirs little disapprobation. In consequence, sectarian proliferation is institutionalized in American life, and was so long before the advent of the Black Church. Hence, from the perspective of the established *white* tradition, there was nothing anomalous about Richard Allen’s allegiance to Methodism. On the other hand, from a different perspective, it could be argued that the peculiar advantages or even the felt need to found a *black* Methodist church in the face of his experience with white Methodists could be difficult to understand. The sources of white sectarianism are historic, but the emergent Black Church had the advantage of a theological and creedal *tabula rosa*, had it determined to recognize and make use of it. The public statement issued in the A.M.E. “Declaration of Independence” (1794) gave the chief reasons necessitating an African church as (1) to avoid giving offense to white Christians by being present and mingling with them in public worship; (2) to prevent Blacks from being offended by religion because of the white abuse and distortion of faith; and (3) to enhance the opportunities for black pride and mutual support, or as the statement put it, “to build



each other up." Surely those objectives must have been normative to every group of black Christians searching for distinctive corporate organization, for the conditions which precipitated them in St. George's were at the very least no worse than those common to the black experience elsewhere in America.

In theory, then, there was a no compelling reason why the Black Church had to have a hydra-headed beginning. In the first place, a Black Church *qua* Black Church would automatically have become a distinctive "denomination." Presumably, it would have been capable of the universality necessary for the inclusion of the limited spectrum of black religious interests thought to exist at the time. A second possibility might have been the construction of an eclectic scaffolding deliberately designed to accommodate such distinctive religious experiences and preferences as there were, but having all in subvention to the compelling values which called the church into existence.

A third possibility might have been the total abandonment of Christianity in favor of some other religion perceived as more conducive to the needs and aspirations of the black estate. After all, the black attachment to the white man's church was tenuous at best and demeaning in any case, and the occasion for being rid of the white man's religion. This was the least viable possibility, of course, for at least two reasons: While the movement across sect or denominational lines may be quite fluid, religions, whatever their negative associations, are, seldom if ever, either embraced or abandoned *en masse* for rational considerations. Mass conversion from one religion to another has sometimes been decreed, and mass renunciation has on occasion been a condition of liberty, or even life itself. But in a free society the motivations which impel men to separate themselves from one religion in favor of another are likely

to be highly personal, individual, and particularistic. Reason may appear as a factor at some level of the process, but it is seldom so defined as to be shared or corporate motivation capable of exciting a mass reversal of religious sentiment. The other reason is more immediately apparent: for an essentially illiterate and captive people, there was simply no other religious precedent available, except the remote possibility of some casual acquaintance with a low profiled, non-proselyting Judaism. The African religious experience had been shattered by the exigencies of slavery, and Christianity had filled the void. It was all they knew, and thereon hangs the essential explanation of black sectarianism.

Since religions derive from specific sociological needs and experiences, and since it functions in the interest of helping man to cope with the more traumatic aspects of human experience, it is reasonable to assume that there will be a discernible relationship between the expression of religion and the cultural matrix out of which it derives, or the social cosmos of religious proliferation may be expected to reflect not only the extensiveness of human trauma (by which I mean those experiences, realized or anticipated, which are the most challenging to human endurance and understanding), but also the capacity for cultural invention to shape or to modify the religious instrument to make it more effective. The Puritan separatists who settled New England, the Baptists who came to Rhode Island, the Quakers in Pennsylvania, the Methodists on the frontier, the Anglicans along the South Atlantic seaboard, the Catholics in Maryland were all alike responding to peculiar cultural impingements and understandings which seemed to dictate their distinctive creedal, ritual, (and in some cases geographical) predilections. The inevitable question is that since religious predisposition is so

prominently affected by cultural experience, why did the Blacks, whose religious experiences did not include any significant occasions for theological objection or modification, and whose other cultural experiences were markedly different from those of their white Christian counterparts, feel compelled to adopt a variety of sectarian motifs at the expense of religious unity? The answer, I think, is consistent with the theory which raises the question.

First, it is to be noted that although there are a variety of black sectarian expressions, they fall mainly under but three distinctive traditions: Methodists, Baptists and exotic cults. Despite their demonstrated weakness in the face of the prevailing sentiment for slavery, the Methodists from time to time showed an unusual solicitude toward Blacks, and this tradition became an important part of the black experience. This is reflected vividly in Richard Allen's passionate confession of his own preference for Methodism, and even more dramatically in Nat Turner's command that only Methodists were to be spared in the massacre of the white tormentors he arranged forty years later. The Baptists were somewhat less pronounced in their humanitarian concern for Blacks, but they did share the tradition. The Quakers, who were most solicitous of all for the life of liberty of black people, made no special efforts to convert the Blacks, nor did they maintain the kind of organizational visibility conducive to replication.

The Methodist and Baptist traditions, then, became the primary *forms* of the black religious investment because those denominations were, on the whole more "friendly," and because their church structures were more familiar.

The black cults are later developments which have differing sources of derivation. The fragmentation within both the black Methodist and Baptist traditions does not

reflect substantive differences in ritual, creed or polity. As a matter of fact, movement across denominational lines within the three Methodist connections and the three Baptist Conventions is both frequent and unimpeded, and movement between the two traditions is quite common.

If the factors which make for fragmentation within the black religious community do not in the first instance result from tradition, and are not substantially creedal or theological, what then are the sources of their derivation? We may look for their causation in the peculiar nature of the social structure which is in turn responsible for a variety of distortions in the black experience in religion. Among them are the following:

(1) The confusion of values and the subsequent desire to replicate the white experience; i.e., if white people have many denominations, so should Blacks.

(2) The rejection of the leveling and homogenization implicit in the caste arrangement; i.e., all Blacks are not the same. Blacks are capable of (and needful of) a variety of religious expressions.

(3) The dearth of leadership opportunities elsewhere in the society. Leadership is a sign of status, and status is a scarce value. There is a direct correlation between the number of discrete religious organizations and the available status positions in the black sub-culture.

(4) Closely related is the over-supply of black leadership potential. In the struggle for self-realization, this pool of potential leadership is attracted by the church, the largest and most viable black institution.

(5) Problems of personal identity, status seeking black missionizing and loyalty to tradition, all have to do with Blacks gathered in white denominations. All these are self-explanatory, with the possible exception of "black missionizing," which refers to the commitment of some Blacks to maintain a symbolic presence in the white

church as a continuing reminder of the sin of racial idolatry.

(6) Exotic identity, communal enterprise or association, and leadership aggrandizement tend to be the most common factors behind the existence of the exotic cults which proliferate in the urban black ghettos.

If now we stand off a bit for perspective and survey the black experience in religion, what we will see is a sort of double funnel – an hour glass-shaped phenomenon into which went a variety of religious traditions as the involuntary African expatriates were led, pushed, enticed or permitted through the Western matrix, to emerge on the other side as Christians. What was anomalous about the whole experience is that though they took with them no traditions of Christian sectarianism, in the process of the limited acculturation that went on in the narrow neck of the double funnel, they either acquired traditions vicariously, or in substituting their own more mundane value projections, they found themselves, however inadvertently, in consonance with established American tradition. They emerged from the funnel one in faith but many in the expression of the faith. This is the situation to which contemporary black ecumenism is addressed.

### **Black Ethnicity**

The task of black ecumenism is, of course, greatly forwarded by black ethnicity. As a matter of fact, it may be said that the successful promotion of black ethnicity is the prior condition, in the absence of which black ecumenism cannot possibly succeed. Black ethnicity is the consolidation of the black ego – the affirmation of value in being black. It does not confuse blackness with supreme value, but black ethnicity does enjoin the recognition that among competing values of the same

order, i.e. allegations of human worth based on the color of the skin, there are none which exceed the black condition and few which approach it. Ethnicity is a cultural philosophy which calls those within its particular universe to recognize themselves as first among equals, and to respond to each other and to all outsiders in terms of that recognition.

Identity is the most critical province of black ethnicity. While identity in most ethnic groups may be largely taken for granted because of the body of myth, folklore and tradition with which a group's history is usually buttressed, the peculiar circumstances conditioning the black experience produced a fantastic body of myth, folklore and conventional wisdom designed deliberately to *confuse* and obscure *black* identity. In consequence, black ethnicity as an instrument designed to promote self-appreciation and external recognition had first to determine just *who* was the subject of its promotion and appreciation. There was no solid body of common agreement. For generations on end, black people had struggled internally, and with gratuitous assistance from the outside, to decide who they were: "Blacks?", "Black Anglo-Saxons?", "Coloreds?", "People of Color?", "Negroes?", "Afro-Americans?", "Afro-Americans?", "Black Americans?", or just who? The issue was far more fundamental than a mere name to go by, for how you are styled is in itself an important condition of who you are. The fundamental issue was how the black experience was to be read and interpreted. Only then could the people who had come through it be styled appropriately. A rose is just a rose until the invention of a nose.

Black ethnicity is the envelopmental cultural philosophy which must be presupposed by black ecumenism and black nationalism alike, and black identity is the critical determination of black ethnicity.

Black ecumenism and black nationalism may, and often do travel together, with resulting inter-confusion for the uncritical. However, the goals of these two strategies are not the same, and inevitably the day comes when the one distinguishes itself from the other. Black nationalism is, after all, a political philosophy. Its goals, which are often amorphous by design, do not give primary consideration to man's spiritual quest, even though religion may be the visible focus, or even the primary vehicle upon which the dynamics of the movement depend. The distinguishing feature arises at the point of the determination of whether ultimate value is assigned to the pragmatics of political interest, or whether ultimate value lies in the spiritual quest with which political intent has become so closely associated. For the black masses, since the sources of their distress require no labels, they are often impatient with the alleged necessity of making fine distinction when in the fervor of togetherness they finally confront the specter which stalks them, and never sleeps. Hence, black nationalism may in fact *assume the character* of religion for many people for whom ultimate value is whatever can restructure the circumstances of their present existence, and produce a reversal in the temporal order by which they are oppressed.

W.E.B. DuBois made famous the theory of "double consciousness," a psychic phenomenon with which Black Americans are peculiarly affected through a peculiar historical happenstance. They are part of two worlds, two cultures, living in and experiencing both, but forever frustrated in their perpetual struggle to reconcile the one to the other. It is one thing to be "American"; it is quite another to be a "Negro" in America. That is precisely why contemporary Blacks reject the term "Negro." For them it has pejorative connotations. Similarly, whereas the simple goal of a black believer is to be Christian and

regarded as such, there is probably no precedent in the religious history of America which could provide real encouragement for that notion. Being Christian and being black risks distortion by the racial prism through which black people are usually refracted. Hence, it may be less painful and more rewarding to the black believer to think of himself as belonging to a religion apart – one that is genius of ethnicity is that it strengthens the ego of the group by dismissing as valueless whatever is beyond its spectrum of possibilities. On the other hand, ethnicity may find value in precisely the experiences of the group which have been belittled or de-valued by outsiders. For example, most black church-goers want a rousing sermon with moving singing and fervent praying as a part of their worship experience. Some want to feel free to let the spirit enter their bodies as well as their souls and have its way with them. At the same time, most Blacks find the worship services of conventional white churches to be cold, damp and uninspiring. Black ethnicity denies the relevance of white styles of worship for black people, and sanctions the ritual patterns developed in the churches of the black experience independent of white influence. These were the ritual styles which depended upon what was remembered of the African heritage, and what was experienced in the American tragedy to develop a pattern of worship which could bring the greatest measure of fulfillment and satisfaction to a suffering people in a strange land and a hostile environment. Hence, despite the sensitivity of Blacks who are less ethically oriented, the ritual format of black religion is seen as its own justification, so long as it is true to its heritage. Indeed, it is valued by many as a distinctive cultural achievement, and a symbol of demarcation in the extensive spectrum of ritual behavior in the American religious enterprise.



Black ecumenism then draws upon the black experience as interpreted by black ethnicity. It presupposes the primacy of spiritual values from the outset, and sees every black Christian as potentially and properly a member of a single confraternity defined by faith, and shaped by experience. It denies the legitimacy or even the reasonableness of black sectarianism because there is no valid tradition of theological or creedal dissonance in the Black Church, and the differences alleged to exist are considered *post hoc*, arbitrary and contrived. On the other hand, black ecumenism contends that the unity of Blacks in America is the logical fruit of the black experience, and that whatever negates this unity is a distortion of history and a continuing detriment to the black estate.

The black experience is seen as the triumphant survival of that unique body of events – cultural, historical, personal and vicarious which; religiously speaking, constitutes the black pilgrimage from home and freedom in America, to slavery and degradation in America. It is the record of suffering and abuse; the memory of loneliness; the sense of alienation; the awesome possibility of dereliction as the power and protection of the familiar God they knew in Africa seemed somehow separated from them as they experienced the white man's ways in America. Wherever the pale hand of human bondage could yoke the neck and ply the whip to the white man's economic advantage, there the black neck was yoked and the black skin felt the whip, and there the blood of Africa was spilled. In the process, the black experience acquired not only geographical and physical and cultural significance, but metaphysical and spiritual significance as well. If God was real and God was just, then not only was there meaning in the black experience and in time they would understand it.

The peculiar endowment insuring black survival has been identified as “soul.” Soul has a popular connotation somewhat less comprehensive, which in turn differs from its theological definition, but there is probably some level of meaning at which all three perspectives find agreement. Whatever else it is, soul seems to be the essence of the black experience. It is the distillate of that whole body of events, and occurrences, actual and derivative which went into the shaping of reality as the Black American understands it. It is the connective skein that runs through the totality of the black experience, weaving it together, making it intelligible, and giving it meaning; the sustaining force which made black survival possible. It is a kind of cultural *elan vital* developed from the necessity of living and performing constantly at levels of physical and psychological endurance far beyond ordinary levels of human capacity. It is that quality or that art developed in the matrix of the black experience retrieving kinship and empathy and understanding from the brutalizing denigration of sustained oppression and alienation. Finally, it is the resuscitated black ego wresting victory from defeat and investing a tragic historical encounter with a certain dignity where no dignity was intended, and the expedience of staying alive. Soul is courage and soul is determination. It is the reaffirmation of the black man’s estimate of himself. An ineffable experience, it is the medium through which the dignity and unity of black people are communicated. It is the enduring ego of the race.

Soul then is an ethnic concept, a product and creator of black culture. It is the art, the music, the religion and the style of black identity – the peculiar language of the black experience because it is the embodiment of that experience, and it evokes an empathetic response in whoever is capable of understanding, valuing and affirming that experience. It

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cannot be separated from religion because the whole black experience assumes the character of a religious pilgrimage. Hence, soul is an ethnic experience and a quality of being which makes an important contribution to the sub-culture of black America in general, and to the Black American's religious predisposition in particular. Because it is at once that common denominator of black identity and the immanent agent of black unification, it is the logical particularly to which black ecumenism must be addressed. Beyond the black enclaves of American religious sectarianism – which trouble the faith in its more provincial considerations, are the legions of black people who also share the faith in its extended cosmos. In this extended cosmos is an extended potential for black ecumenism, because black ecumenism is in search of soul. And soul is the American participation in negritude, a universal component of the African experience wherever black people are gathered.