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## SEXUAL ATTITUDES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHRISTIANS AND THE INCIDENCE OF HIV IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

### Introduction

The high incidence of HIV/AIDS in African-American communities is well-documented. This essay discusses several factors contributing to self-understandings and self-attitudes. These concepts undergird risky behaviors in our communities and must be addressed if HIV is to be significantly reduced and overall quality of life enhanced. Four stories are shared to illustrate this: three are composites from my clinical cases and the fourth is from pastoral-care experiences in churches.

The first story is a **seminarian** who had recently married. Prior to this relationship he had been, in his own words, quite a ladies' man, establishing sexual liaisons, and enjoying sexual adventures. When he accepted Jesus Christ into his life a few months before his marriage, he vowed that he would never be attracted to another woman and pledged to God that his total erotic focus would be his wife. One day, I received a call from him, indicating that he was in a crisis, needing to see me right away. We scheduled the requested appointment. The crisis as he understood it: he had violated the vow made with God never to be attracted to another woman. He had begun to find himself attracted to women he saw in church, his office, his classes—everywhere. He could not understand this because he really was working to maintain his commitment to his wife

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and his vow to God. It seemed to him that temptation was everywhere. "What was God's purpose in sending him this affliction, and what was wrong with him that he could not keep his vow regarding feelings of attraction to other women?" He had been praying fervently that God would free him of these feelings and was planning a seven-day fast. In his pre-conversion life, these kinds of sexual feelings meant a call to action, a call to possess, to take as his own, rather than just a notification that his eyes were in good-working order. He literally asked me how to turn off this part of himself.

The second story is a seasoned successful **pastor** close to retirement, who needed to understand why he could not maintain a commitment of fidelity with his wife of some thirty years. He loved her and wanted to spend his retirement with her; however, he found himself straying despite attempts to remain faithful. Throughout his ministry he had had numerous affairs, but recently had begun to wonder what was really going on, particularly since he had been careless in the most recent liaisons and had almost gotten caught. His wife had become suspicious of his behavior and was asking too many questions. He explained his behavior to her as a mid-life crisis, and she insisted that he go for counseling. Though effective in other areas of his life, being accountable to himself for his sexual life seemed to be beyond his control; this inability was profoundly confusing to him.

The third example is about a **group of church women**, who had met the new pastor of their congregation. These women were overheard discussing which one of them would be the first to "bed" the new pastor. To the listener, it seemed that the women were competing to see which one would be



the first to prove that the preacher was no different than any other man as well as which one's sexual wares were the most powerful for ensnaring the pastor.

The last story is drawn from my **experience in the African Methodist Episcopal**, the **church** in which I was ordained. Women deserving to be ordained as Deaconesses were those in the congregation no longer concerned with worldly interests of the flesh such as appearances, money, men, and sex. They were women concerned only with the things of the spirit. In order to be suitable for this holy order they were to be pious women devoid of any fleshly desires—good Christian women matured beyond the temptations of the flesh.

### Sexuality

Sexuality for many Black persons and particularly many Christian Black people is negated as a valued component of our Christian journey; it is often experienced as a base aspect of our humanity that must be repressed. It is seen as source of human depravity and is understood as a manifestation of our fallen state. In short, sexuality is seen as something we are doomed to experience because of our inherent sinfulness. In each of the scenarios presented, sexuality was not experienced as an integrated aspect of humanity but to be suppressed, overcome. It is this mysterious aspect—one's self—over which human beings have no control. From this perspective, it is a utility, a product to be bartered or an instrument of domination and manipulation. Sexuality for many church folk is seen as the most potent negative impact of Adam and Eve's accept-

ance of the knowledge of good and evil. God-fearing Christians must guard against anything that suggests sensuality or sexuality. For many Black Christians, sex is a dirty secret, which must be repressed in all its varied manifestations lest it get out of control. This quote from Lee Butler underscores this understanding.

When our puritanical logic is applied to our ideas of the exotic, Black bodies are identified as the embodiment of unbridled passion. This has resulted in spiritual pronouncements being made about Black bodies that have emphasized radicalized sexual differences and projected a variety of sexual discomforts and fantasies onto Blackness. Consequently, our Black bodies are frequently seen, and experienced as the unholy, unclean incarnation of evil in America.<sup>1</sup>

This sense of unholy, essentially evil Black body, has been internalized as “truth”; and if one is to be Christian, one must denounce the flesh with its range of desires. So in order to conform (or shall we say accommodate this “truth”) all that is related to sexuality is kept separate from church life, religious strivings, held in secret, and performed in segmented areas of one’s life. Pretenses of spontaneous eruptions, accidental occurrences, “we don’t know how this happened”; “I was caught off guard”; “the devil got into me” are used as a defense against the reality of our human God-given capacities. In this context, planning, preparation, discussion make a lie of the claim of innocence.

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<sup>1</sup>Lee Butler, “The Spirit Is Willing and the Flesh Is Too: Living Whole and Holy Lives Through Integrating Spirituality and Sexuality,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 116.



### Body-Self

There are numerous reasons for undertaking a radical reassessment of how African Americans view their bodies as African Americans. Responsible self-care in sexual relationships is absolutely necessary for the reduction of HIV/AIDS; it is the most critical reason. An equally important reason includes how the body is viewed in terms of the value of the body-self to and for the person in relationship with the divine as well as what the body-self contributes to living fully and holistically. How one truly feels about the body-self impacts the activities in which one engages through the body and how one cares for the body. In short, if I believe that I am filthy rags, that my flesh is evil, and that feeling the urges of my body disconnect me from the divine and from what is best in me, then I must deny, avoid, ignore, pretend, dissociate from the realities of my body-self.

A healthy self-esteem is necessary for healthy sexuality. One must feel good about the core-being of one's self to develop healthy sexuality. This means an appreciation of one's body and one's body experiences. Another way of saying this is that one must be at home in one's body. One needs to know how the human body is designed to function not in minute details but in those ways that impact how one lives in and with the body personally and interpersonally. Collaborative to developing a healthy appreciation for one's body is understanding how one's body functions in all of its manifestations.

Being aware of the range of feeling sensations that occur in the body, both the negative and the positive, is critical to healthy

functioning. Feeling the sensations that the body has the capacity for expressing, provides data for choice and self-care. This is not to say that one acts out or acts on these feelings, but that one is familiar with the body as a vehicle capable of a wide-range of feelings. Mind, body, and spirit are intimately connected, being "wonderfully made." Our bodies tell us when it feels sleepy; it knows when it feels hungry; it knows when it is horny; it knows when it is tired; it knows it is alarmed; it knows when it is angry; it knows when it is embarrassed. The body feels even when the mind refuses to deal with body feelings. The human body is capable of registering a wide range of needs and feelings without having to be cued by our conscious mental apparatus. A person does not have to hold up a sign for the body to know what is needed: food, rest, sex, fight, or flight. How one views body-self shapes the way one feels about one's self and the bodies of other human beings. If I tend to minimize the body that I am, I also minimize the importance of activities that I engage in with my body. What I do with my body becomes meaningless. When my body ceases to be fully personal, that it is my own, my ability to value my body in my relationships to other body-selves is diminished. When one denies certain aspects of bodily functioning, one's relationship to other human beings and their body-selves tend to diminish.

### **Black Bodies and the Legacy of Slavery**

In the Black community, our feelings about our bodies have emerged from the interaction of at least three critical sources: the legacy of slavery, westernized Christianity, and misreading of scripture relating to sexuality. We have internal-



ized the legacy of slavery and segregation; our bodies are valuable to others and worthless to us—valuable in the sense that others can use us for their purposes. A more poignant statement of this reality is noted in Kelly Brown Douglas' *Black Sexuality in the Black Church*, is exemplified in the words of a South-African woman, a victim of apartheid.

I carry in my body the scars of violence, of generations of slavery, rape and murder. I carry in my body the scars of violence. How does this affect the way I walk, the way I look, the way I relate to others? I will take just one example: I have spent some months being intensely self-conscious about my body. I discovered that I sit with my shoulders hunched. Raised and angry voices make me hunch further. So it took me all my life to realize that even though a hand was never raised to me at home I walk and sit like a child who grows up in a violent household, like someone who tries not to be noticed in case they get hit. My stance is inherited for how many generations I cannot say. But I began to understand the difference between walking like a slave and walking like a free woman. And those hunched shoulders affected my stance; suddenly I realized how much time I spent looking down, and how little time I spent looking upwards to the Light. As I practiced walking tall, I discovered how much pain I had been around with in my backbone, the pain of generations.<sup>2</sup>

As Black women and men in varying ways, our bodies reflect the damage done to our psyches. Even our attempts to

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<sup>2</sup>Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 73-74.

prove that the damage did not “take” through lavish dressing, patriarchal-toned-machismo, hyper-sexualized-femininity does not obscure the deep internal fear of our basic unacceptability to ourselves and others. We have avoided developing a healthy self-appreciation for ourselves as wonderfully created human beings for pseudo forms of self-acceptance, distancing us from the hated body. For instance, we become super spiritual declaring all that we need is to love Jesus and that he is our lover and husband. We engage in all manner of bodily deprivation to prove that our holiness has overcome the demands of the flesh. We often trade the beauty of the temple for the lukewarm porridge of piety. The body is reduced to filthy rags in order to avoid facing the confusion generated by our wants. We indict our body-selves for their greediness, suppressing their need for attention and validation.

Yet, there is yet another not often discussed aspect of Black sexuality. In the decidedly non-church setting there is a profound awareness of Black sexuality and sensuality traditionally found in Black music. It is not from hip-hop lyrics so often demeaning of Black women and Black sexuality that this awareness exists. It is in the music of the blues where Black women and men voice the fullness of their being and the pain of their bodily existence in a world that denies their value as embodied expressions of divine creativity. These songs were earthy and authentic expressions of the duality of Black existence. As a child, though I was not old enough to understand the words of Billie Holiday's song, *Strange Fruit*, I knew intuitively that bad things were done to Black bodies because they were Black. These bad things were not right. Your body color could get



you killed. Your body color rendered you less than human. The body color over which you had no control made you a victim. The Black body was a bad thing that could enjoy itself in hidden places but could not risk validation in public places. Often the same persons who went to the juke-joint or the club on Saturday night were the same people who went to church on Sunday morning and sang and prayed that God would relieve them of their taste for liquor and sex. People would ask God to separate their souls from their bodies, hoping that what was occurring in their bodies would not keep them out of their heavenly home. These Christian people projected their bodily hatred onto God. God could only love them as disembodied souls. Not even God could love their Black ugly bodies was the message that too many African Americans have internalized. So that aspect of our lives where we often felt most alive was kept secret and separated from our spiritual or church life.

Within church circles, sexuality was actively denied—particularly for women. To enjoy one's sensuality, one's bodily experience, was to risk the label of slut, a whore, or I guess more currently "hutchie," the term I heard most recently from my granddaughter whose father did not want her looking like a "hutchie." So good church women learned to hide and deny their sensuality to play the role of the good Christian woman who would do her duty for her husband. In too many instances, women who owned their sexuality would often reduce it to a tool for competition and manipulation, discussed in secret, if at all. In a kind of parallel process many Christian men had a woman "on the side" or an "outside" woman and enjoyed them

sexually and had a good church woman taking care of their home and “inside” children.

This splitting of body from spirituality makes it difficult for Black churches to minister in any meaningful way in areas of sexuality and spirituality. To be sexual is to be caught up in the world—Satan’s tool; to be spiritual is not be concerned with things of the flesh, of the body, nor to enjoy the body. So the process of choice emerging out of thoughtful reflection is eliminated; decision-making processes are short circuited because active awareness of sexuality is restricted to times when we lose control, lose touch with the Lord, take our hands from the cross, and get caught up in the moment. We teach our girls to keep their dresses down, panties up, and their knees tight, both to avoid giving in to temptation as well as to keep them disconnected from their own urges. We secretly encourage “letting” our boys sow their “wild oats,” with words like “you know how boys are”; “they just can’t help themselves for you see their penises are disconnected from their brains”; “that’s just the way men are.”

### **Black Bodies and Scripture Relating to Sexuality**

How religious behavior got so distorted is not just the problem of the Black community. It is the problem of westernized religion. It is the problem of our Judaic/Christian heritage. Although ancient Hebrew religion originally did not condemn sexuality, it is often appropriated to denounce it. Sexuality in ancient Hebrew religion was understood as totally within the realm of human activity. It was God’s gift to



humanity in creation. God made us as relational human beings to be intimately involved with one another. The male and female were created to be in companionship with each other. The woman was not initially understood as being created for the sexual satisfaction of the man. Sexuality in Hebrew thought is an element in human life over which human beings were to have accountability. David was responsible for his adulterous behavior, and Joseph was responsible for saying “no” to Polisher’s wife.

In *Song of Songs*, the reality of God as a loving God who not only knows the desires of a woman’s heart but shares in that delighting.<sup>3</sup> The author reinforces the understanding that God created everything—even sexuality—and that it was good and to be used and enjoyed responsibly. This ancient Hebrew attitude preceded metaphysical dualism: the view that the body and world are evil and only what is spiritual is good and worthy of God. The act of procreation is blessed. Even in the aftermath of their eviction from the garden of paradise, in the Hebrew, God assures Eve that the pains of childbirth will not quench her sexual appetite. It is clear from the Hebrew that *eros*, sexual desire, was given by God to human beings. That sexuality is a good gift of God.

### Black Bodies and Westernized Christianity

To the extent that we reject our bodies, we find it difficult to talk about and experience them as a thing or a slave owned by the self. This dualistic alienation is further complicated in that an oppressed or rejected body becomes an opponent to

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<sup>3</sup>Carly Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 111.

the self and will seek revenge for being repressed. According to James Nelson, "Deprived of *eros*, the body can become the champion of *thanatos*." The body becomes a vehicle for emotional/spiritual death. What we reject in ourselves can then be projected outward. Fear of the body is expressed in our daily interactions.<sup>4</sup> We distance both emotions and bodies in our relationships: unable to talk through or manage our attractions for purposes of choice much less for preparation. Christianity has been influenced by those aspects of Greek thought that denigrated the body and fostered a profound split between the body the spirit.

Kelly Brown Douglas writes:

It was into this Greco-Roman world of dualistic philosophy that Christianity entered. There is perhaps no Christian thinker more significantly influenced by the dualistic thinking of Platonism, neo-Platonism, and Stoicism than Augustine of Hippo, who subsequently had tremendous impact on Christian thought. Neo-Platonism offered Augustine 'a vision of eternal truth and a call to turn away from sensual pleasure and purify his soul.'<sup>5</sup>

The Protestant reformation furthered the entrenchment of dualism through the legacy of Luther and Calvin.

The interpretation of scripture is inhibited through the filter of dualism. Douglas asserts that Black people continue to rely on their oral/tradition for appropriating the Bible than on what may come out of books about the Bible. Evidence of this

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<sup>4</sup>James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing Press, 1978), 40-42.

<sup>5</sup>Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 26.



is heard in numerous statements often made by Black men and women to the effect that "all that book learning (in relation to the Bible) has nothing to do with God." The scriptures divorced from the reality of their historical and cultural contexts and applied as mandates for current settings collaborate with dualism to reinforce sexual repression.

### Conclusion

The challenge for us as teachers, preachers, priests, and prophets is to engage the dialogue around sexuality with both an appreciation for and sensitivity to its embeddedness in the legacy of history and culture. In Bible studies, preaching and pastoral care, the challenge is to confront traditional thinking that separates the body from the soul, thus alienating people from their authentic selves. Alienation contributes to denial, avoidance of attending to self-care around sexuality, as well as a range of other health issues, disproportionately impacting the African-American community.

