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SPIRITUALITY AND LEADERSHIP IN THE AFRIKAN CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA: A REFLECTION

Introduction

Since the formation of Afrikan Churches in North America, there has been "dis-ease" in Afrikan Zion. Far too many Afrikan-descended Christian leaders teach and preach the Bible as if it says nothing about the lived experiences of oppressed Afrikan peoples. The gospel, after all, proclaims liberty to the captives. While not denying the role that Afrikan-descended leaders have played in abolishing systemic forms of oppression through various protests and rebellions, there remains a self-deprecating consciousness among Afrikan followers of Christ. Why? It is the way teachers, preachers, and leaders in the Afrikan Church, image both God and Christ; fail to take our own agency seriously as we come to the texts of Scripture and governance of the Church; and insist on replicating the liturgical practices of our historic oppressors.

We need to ask these questions: Why is this freedom so integral to the gospel of Jesus the Christ? Can any oppressed person who uncritically subscribes to the theologies, liturgies, and forms of governance of the oppressor ever truly attain that freedom? At a deeper level, the questions might be, Why are Afrikan Christians in North America so enamored with European influences on liturgy, governance, and

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theology, on the one hand, and so disparaging of the Afrikan impact in these same areas, on the other hand? What is it that Afrikans in North America find so compelling about "everything European" and repulsive about "all things Afrikan"? These are not new questions.

European Hegemony Challenged

In the past century, Afrikan-descended pastors, scholars, and leaders have challenged European ideological and theological hegemony in the Afrikan Church in North America. Bishop Henry McNeil Turner was among the first to argue for and develop the notion that "God is a Negro."¹ Similarly, Marcus Mosaic Garvey argued that "if, as established Christian churches preached, man was made in the image and likeness of God, then black men should depict a God in their own image and likeness, which would inevitably be black."² Robert Hood, in *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk*, raised the following questions: "Do Christians from Third World cultures have to become imitation Europeans or imitation North Americans before they can be considered fitting contributors to the formation and shaping of Christian thought? Must they steadily continue to contribute to their own *invisibility* (emphasis that of writer) within Christian thought by surrendering traditions and cultures long dismissed as "pagan," "animistic," "heathen" and "polytheistic"?³

¹For a discussion of this concept see Mungo M. Paxton, *Life and Times of Henry M. Turner* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970).

²Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Dover, MA: The Majority Press, 1976), 69.

³Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 9.

Continuing this challenge, Josiah Young, in *Black and African Theologies: Siblings or Distant Cousins?* states the following:

The major task of African theologians is to expose continuities and discontinuities between African traditional religion and Christian faith. . . . This study upholds the view that there is ground for a future alignment between black theologians of the United States and Africa. Inasmuch as black theologians in both places share similarities, black liberation themes might join with themes of African indigenization in a theology relevant to Africa and its Diaspora. Together they might render valuable service to the poor and thus to the gospel.⁴

Then Dwight Hopkins and George Cummings studied slave narratives in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* and attempted to distill the core beliefs of enslaved Afrikan peoples in North America. They discovered that many enslaved Afrikans “took the remnants of their traditional religious structures and meshed them together with their interpretations of the Bible.”⁵ Finally, Will Coleman, in *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African American Ways of “Telling the Story,”* sets forth the argument, particularly in the first chapter, that the deep religious thought of Afrikan peoples is foundational for Afrikans living and doing theology in the Diaspora.⁶

⁴Josiah U. Young, *Black and African Theologies: Siblings or Distant Cousins?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 2-3.

⁵Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 7.

⁶See Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics and African American Ways of “Telling the Story”* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), chap. 1, [4]–29, esp. 27-29.

It seems then, that every so often God sends a messenger to Afrikan peoples in an effort to call them home spiritually. Yet, we are not saved, nor are we free because there remains persistent "dis-ease" of self-hatred and self-deprecation in Afrikan Zion. We are not free because our vision of God is obscured by our collective unwillingness to see God with our own eyes. Though many of the external chains of oppression have been broken; far too many of us remain bound to notions of God, culture, and community—none of which are our own.

Women and "Dis-Ease"

This failure to see *our* God or more precisely, to see *ourselves* in God, is not limited to Afrikan-descended peoples. Women have struggled and continue to struggle with a similar "dis-ease"; Afrikan women bear a triple burden. The Bible is radically patriarchal in the way it images God: Many, if not most interpreters of the Bible, whether male or female, bring their sexism to the text. Further, the question of economic location, especially in relation to women, is seldom raised by either pastors or other church leaders. Several scholars address these concerns.

Jacquelyn Grant in *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* engages the issue of Christology and argues that "Black feminism grows out of Black women's tri-dimensional reality of race/sex/class. It holds that full human liberation cannot be achieved simply by the elimination of any one form of oppression."⁷ Delores Williams in "*Sisters in the*

⁷Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 202.

Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, during a discussion on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, says that "The idea of the divine spirit working within humans is more efficacious for women's development of self-worth than notions of God in male or female form."⁸

These women and others like Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, Kelly Brown-Douglas, Teresa Fry Brown, and Renita Weems re-image God, wresting God from the deadly clutches of patriarchy while simultaneously attending race and class issues. Yet there remains "dis-ease" in Afrikan Zion, and we are not saved. What is the cure for our "dis-ease"?

Spirit/Spirituality

Our salvation comes from knowing who we are and what we are to do in the world. The question of identity and purpose is at the heart of problems confronting Afrikan-descended peoples both on the continent of Afrika and throughout the Afrikan Diaspora. Our collective proclivity towards everything European and/or American is inextricably tied to the vicious, ongoing *Maafa* (destruction) and the concomitant campaign to denigrate everything indigenous to Afrika, including notions of God.

There is the urge to resist laying many of the past and present problems in Afrika and among Afrikan people at the feet of *Maafa*. Until confessions are made, forgiveness is sought and given, and significant reparations are paid, the "dis-ease" of Afrikan people cannot be cured. Until there is an invitation to the table of communalship to which all of God's children are invited to eat of the bounty of God's

⁸Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 56.

supply without ever truly acknowledging—without addressing—the sin that prohibits true communalship, real communion, we cannot “get over it.” We need one another desperately—Afrikan, Asian, and European. But our fathers and mothers ate sour grapes; our teeth remain on edge.

Did Jesus not pay it all? Was it not all buried with him at his death? Did he not pay the needed restitution? Yes and no. Yes, if all racism and prejudice, sexism and bigotry, classism and homophobia are under the “blood of the Lamb”; and if we have confessed and repented of our part in them, walking in the newness of peace and unity with those pushed to the margins of our global reality today. No, if we make excuses for ourselves; no, if we continue to deny our own culpability in the transgressions of our ancestors.

In truth, our blackness, whiteness, redness, or “yellowishness” are false categories. If we believe the biblical text, God created humankind in God’s own “image and likeness.”⁹ Further, the sexual categories we use to differentiate between male and female were not intended to separate the sexes but to unify them. The Divine idea was and is for human beings to find a point of unity in their common origin—God. For this reason, there can be no question that every person is “spiritual.” Though every people have and practice one or more forms of “spirituality,” the essence—the vital life force, the core reality of human being—is spirit.

From a biblical perspective the God(s) (Elohim) said, “Let us make [humankind] in our own image, according to our likeness. . . . So the God(s) (Elohim) created [humankind] in God’s image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them.”¹⁰ Who were the God(s) who

⁹Genesis 1:26-27 NRSV.

¹⁰Ibid.

created humankind and what was their form? Were they corporeal beings like the human beings they created in their own "image and likeness," or were they spiritual beings analogous to contemporary notions of energy? If the former, where are they now, or where did they go? If the latter, then in what sense are human beings created in their image and likeness? Of course, most readers of scripture perceive the God(s) as wholly spiritual beings who are ever present though invisible to the naked eye and intangible to the human touch. Human beings, therefore, bear the image and likeness of the God(s) in their essence or core. In that sense each person is spiritual.

The word for God in Genesis 1, "Elohim," while plural, is frequently translated by the singular noun "God." Though sometimes interpreted in its plural sense, it is most often used to convey what is called "the plural of majesty" and is inclusive of all deities. If this is true, then one must consider the fact that even female deities are subsumed under this appellation.

The second creation story in Genesis 2 drives the point home: "Then the Lord God [Yahweh Elohim] formed man [*adam*] from the dust of the ground [*adamah*], and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."¹¹ God formed the corporeal aspect of man using the dust of the ground, a feminine element. The being man did not live until God breathed into his nostrils the breath [*neshamah*] of life. The Hebrew word *neshamah* may also be translated by the English word "spirit." Again, the vital principle or life force in humankind is spirit. All people are spiritual from a biblical perspective. Human beings are spir-

¹¹Genesis 2:7 NRSV.

itual precisely because their essential nature is spirit. Further, all people practice one or more forms of spirituality. While the creation account in Genesis 2 separates the creation of the man from that of the woman, it also unifies male and female in a powerful way. Woman is depicted as being created from the rib of the man by God¹² and thereby made the perfect/complete complement of one another—so much so that they are to be “one flesh.”¹³

Spirituality must not be confused with religious expression or devotion. The former suggests an ontological reality—the essential nature of human being—spirit. The latter, religious expression or devotion, points toward a plethora of ways that human beings have sought and continue to seek an inner wholeness. This inner peace that we seek is a deeper awareness of and oneness with God—that invisible, intangible yet pervasive and ever present person(s) in whose image we have been made and whose breath/spirit has given us life. Human beings, as spiritual beings who routinely practice a spirituality, cannot do otherwise.

Jesus' Ministry As a Model for Leaders in the Afrikan Church

Generally speaking, the Afrikan Church of the twenty-first century exists within a multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-faith environment. She and her people also face impoverishment, disease, and oppression. Though enslavement and Jim Crow semi-slavery no longer exist by legal fiat, the privatization of the nation's prisons holding a disproportionately high percentage of Afrikan men relative to

¹²Genesis 2:21-22 NRSV.

¹³Genesis 2:24 NRSV.

their percentage of the American population; the re-segregation and underfunding of the nation's inner-city public schools; the tragically high percentage of chronic illnesses of all descriptions among Afrikans in North America along with the concomitant lack of affordable healthcare; and the continued disparity in salaries between European Americans and Afrikan Americans—all attest to both the “dis-ease” prominent in the Afrikan Zion and the continuing disparities between Afrikan and non-Afrikan Americans with the exception of First World/Native American peoples. Given the weight of verifiable evidence, no reasonable person could argue that the masses of Afrikan people in North America are better off than they were fifty years ago even though it is also true that a larger percentage of Afrikan-descended people now occupy the ranks of the American middle- and upper-economic classes.

It was once true that many prominent leaders in the Afrikan Church in North America spoke with a prophetic voice and challenged the institutional structures of racism and classism through their demand for justice on the basis of Christian morality. Now, in all too many instances, they stand on the sidelines of the “playing field of justice,” boldly collecting the meager resources of their own downtrodden people for personal benefit. There are, however, a number of less influential leaders in the Afrikan Church in North America still standing boldly in the traditions of their mothers and fathers. Without public acclaim, they serve the present age with courage and determination. Yet, we are not saved. The “dis-ease” remains in Afrikan Zion. Why?

While the Afrikan Church in North America has an extremely vital witness to offer, i.e., the gospel of God through Jesus the Christ, it can ill afford to be bigoted, sex-

ist, classist, and judgmental regarding the people it has been called and sent by Christ to evangelize. Rather, the Afrikan Church in North America must struggle to become like its Lord—completely obedient to and focused on living and doing the will of God. This is no small task!

Jesus was the word of God incarnate precisely because he chose to listen to and obey God even to death on a cross within a particular religious, social, political, cultural, economic, and historical reality. The religio-cultural and socio-political realities within which Jesus lived were Judaism and Roman colonialism. The economic and historical realities were poverty and Roman oppression, respectively. Given this milieu, Jesus could have opted to choose the path of least resistance: the socio-religious way that was the safest, the oft trodden road that always leads to success within empire. Indeed the devil is imaged as tempting Jesus to choose one or more of these alternate routes (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:1-13). Rather than choosing the way of the temple, i.e., institutionalized Judaism, or the way of assimilation into the Roman colonial matrix, Jesus chose a third way, the way of Godly obedience. This third way that Jesus chose for himself and for his followers was the most difficult by far—leading to his death and resurrection.

Contemporary leaders in the Afrikan Church in North America are called to follow Jesus. Though there is no record of Jesus himself ever demanding that we worship him, we have chosen to worship rather than to follow him. We must first, therefore, decide to follow him even as we worship our God in his name. But who is our God?

To speak of God, using a color symbol like black may indeed be far too limiting of the God reality. While such a symbol has been useful in the past, enough has now been

written about Afrikan notions of God to remember the God(s) of our ancestors. Further, while the color "black" might be limiting, it is liberating to know that Afrikan peoples possessed notions of God long before their encounters with Christianized Europeans. Afrikan notions of God were not wholly animistic, nor were they in any way barbaric. They were different from, and in numerous ways similar to, the Judeo-Christian conception of God. For example, the ancient Egyptians, like most Afrikan peoples, possessed a dynamic mythic world long before Yahweh spoke to Moses at the burning bush.

Within the Egyptian cosmogony there was a single Creator or High God called *Atum* in Heliopolis, *Ptah* in Memphis, *Amen* in Thebes, and *Re/Ra* in Hermopolis. According to one creation account, "in the beginning a great flood, known as the Nun or Nu, engulfed the universe. As in the Bible, the Creator's spirit caused the waters to stir, initiating the generative process. Out of the Nun arose the primeval hill and the self-created Creator. . . ." Also, "Other deities, like angels in the Bible, were the creations of the one all-powerful deity, and each of the cult centers tried to argue that the Creator deities of the other cults were just lesser deities created by their own chief god."¹⁴ Sir E.A. Wallis Budge in the book, *Egyptian Religion*, offers another, though similar version of the creation.

According to the writings of the Egyptians, there was a time when neither heaven nor earth existed, and when nothing had being except the boundless primeval

¹⁴Gary Greenberg, *The Moses Mystery: The African Origins of the Jewish People* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Stream Publishing Group, 1959), 144.

water, which was, however, shrouded with thick darkness. . . .At length the spirit of the primeval water felt the desire for creative activity, and having uttered the word, the world sprang straightway into being in the form which had already been depicted in the mind of the spirit before he spake the word which resulted in its creation. The next act of creation was the formation of a germ, or egg, from which sprang Rꜥ, the Sun-god, within whose shining form was embodied the almighty power of the divine spirit.¹⁵

These Egyptian creation stories were old by the time Joseph and Jacob-Israel entered Egypt. Are we to believe that the descendants of Jacob-Israel spent nearly 400 years in Egypt while Afrika was left untouched by her notions of God, spirit, creation, the afterlife, and anthropology? It is more than likely that all of the descendants of Jacob-Israel, especially Moses who was raised in the Pharaoh's house, were deeply influenced by ancient Egyptian religious ideas. If God is in some sense "Black," this is so because Black Afrikan peoples were among the first to receive and to communicate the Divine self-revelation. Leaders in the Afrikan Church in North America should study the religious ideas of ancient Afrika, especially Egypt, with at least as much dedication and zeal as we do those of Europe. This is particularly true of the myth of Osiris (*Ausar*) the Egyptian deity of resurrection.

There are several versions of the myth of Osiris. In short, Osiris was of divine origin, suffered death and muti-

¹⁵Sir E.A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Religion: Egyptian Ideas of the Future Life* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Stream Publishing Group, 1959), 40-41.

lation at the hands of his evil brother Set, buried and rose again and rules as king of the underworld and judge of the dead. Egyptians believed that because Osiris conquered death, the righteous Egyptian could also conquer death.¹⁶ This myth captivated the Egyptian mind and their devout attention to it throughout antiquity. Indeed, "they raised Osiris to such an exalted position in heaven that he became the equal and, in certain cases, the superior to RÇ and venerated him as God."¹⁷ As difficult as it may be for many Christians to accept, it is impossible to read the ancient myth of Osiris and fail to see its relationship to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The relationship between East Afrikan/Egyptian cosmogony and West Afrikan cosmogonies cannot be explored in this essay. There are differences and profound similarities. The complex notions of God that existed in the Afrikan consciousness prior to capture, enslavement, and colonization prior to both the Islamic and Christian slave trades were not completely erased by these traumatizing experiences. There remains within Afrikan peoples a deep and profound longing for re-union with God's Holy Spirit—the kind of re-union that erases the false dichotomy between sacred and secular, holy and profane, seen and experienced in so much of twenty-first century Christendom.

Conclusion

It is to the God ideas of Afrika that leaders in the Afrikan Church in North America must return in order to

¹⁶Ibid., 61.

¹⁷Ibid.

fully grasp, internalize, and live out of the spirituality and covenant commitments of our ancestors. This is a call to reform the faith that is ours in God through the Christ. It is simultaneously the call to move beyond the spirit-defeating and spirit-destroying literalism of Christian fundamentalism. It is the third way—the way that leads to communion with the Afrikan God, sharing the paradise of God's eternal reigndom. Major J. Jones reminds us, in *The Color of G-o-d: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought*, that “the ‘new’ of Christianity merely enlarged what was already authentic and foundational to the African God-concept in the mind of Africans who became the slaves of White Christians 300 and more years ago. The linkage between the African's concept of God and the Afro-American's concept of God must be seen against both the long-term religious traditions of African antiquity and the shorter-term religious traditions since slavery.”¹⁸

These foundational commitments will transform the Afrikan psyche, enabling a liberating spirituality, both individually and collectively. They will also place us in opposition to the stultifying religious and political ideologies of empire. For example, embedded in the faith of our mothers and fathers is the divine feminine principle who complements her male counterpart in every conceivable way. Such a renewed vision of the Godhead will, in time, annihilate the destructive consequences of divine patriarchy. Yet, those who chose a third way will simultaneously choose the way of the cross, crucifixion, death, and ultimately resurrection.

¹⁸Major J. Jones, *The Color of G-o-d: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 19.

So Many Deaths Unnecessary

When you refuse to deal with your pain,
It waits for you, crouched
In unsuspecting corners,
Pouncing at every turn
When life rubs up against you
Like so many pumice rocks,
Peeling back the false "I do well" smiles,
Uncovering the scabbed-over hurts of childhood,
Untimely lovers, and lost friendships

When you refuse to deal with the grief
That surges in your bloodstream,
It calculates when it will accost you,
At the moment of your greatest joy,
Slapping you, sending you reeling
From the suddenness of revelation
That no amount of denial
Will make the loss minimal
Or less profound

Pia said your demons bite you
In the butt when you run,

Trying to get away from them
Like so many mosquitoes on perfumed
And exposed skin

When the demons of your sorrow, your pain,
And your griefs are left unfronted
And un-dealt with, you surrender your life
Like so many deaths unnecessary

The following is a list of the names of the persons who have died in the hospital during the past year. The names are arranged in alphabetical order. The names of the persons who have died in the hospital during the past year are as follows: [The text is extremely faint and illegible, appearing to be a list of names.]