

BY HENRY H. MITCHELL

Some Preliminary Reflections on Authority in Black Religion

Western religious thought is perpetually anxious to legitimate itself — to undergird beliefs. Every school of theological thought has its own view of the authority of the Christian Gospel. The temptation and perhaps even the need exists for Black Religion to do the same. Yet the instant it consents even to deal with the “problem of authority,” it runs the risk of conceding both an alien set of criteria and a whole new frame of reference. Nevertheless, Black Religion, which is Christian, must ultimately eschew theological isolationism and walls of partition, especially after it has found itself. The solution to the danger and dilemma of conceding too much would seem to lie in a careful statement of what Black Religion is, *in its own terms*, followed by a statement of what it is not, possibly employing tentative comparisons with stereotypes of Western theology. It was this sort of statement and comparison that seized my mind on a flight far from these shores, and what follows was transcribed on landing. It is offered here as a start for the process just mentioned.

The suggestion about stereotype is serious. The descriptions of White theology necessary to any comparison must remain tentative. Blacks dare not claim any more expertise in white religion than whites dare claim in black religion. Of course, in the light of the huge amount of the study of white religion which is required of blacks to gain “accredited” theological degrees, this proposal of the equality of ignorance across lines requires considerable modesty on the part of blacks. But it has the tactical advantage of creating rules for the game which preclude both the temptation to poach on each other’s territory and the need to defend against such poaching. Stated another way, blacks must avoid the temptation to build a body of beliefs from the ashes of another rather than out of their own roots, an approach highly tempting for purposes of easy impressiveness. This approach is also full of bad precedents and *ad hominum* arguments on the weaknesses of the faith of the Euro-American middle class. Whatever a black says about an admitted “stereotype” can be easily withdrawn if the comparison fails to serve the purposes of the dialogue. Nevertheless, *some* calculated risks must be taken in both the proposal and acceptance of such stereotypes if any meaningful dialogue is to take place across religio-cultural lines.

The authority of the oral (and now somewhat written) tradition of blackamerican Christianity is alive and very well. Its forerunner in African Traditional Religion is quite alive in West Africa, whence came almost all of the original slaves, and it is somewhat similarly healthy in the folk faith of the black Christian masses of the U.S.A. In Africa

children and adults sing and dance, argue and just ordinarily converse, all the while employing freely the proverbial, quasi-religious wisdom of their foreparents. Nobody seems to worry about their "validity." The traditionally raised child can recite huge collections of sayings effortlessly. And the quotation in such normal conversational context clearly assumes the unquestionable authority of the proverb, both for speaker and hearer. Among blackamericans God-talk may not be as common as it once was, but clearly religious insights are still important in the culture. No soul sister or brother would dream of trying to make it through deep trouble, especially the death of a loved one, without serious reference to and dependence upon a body of wise sayings traceable to the Bible, as known and quoted by the foreparents for generations. Quite obviously, the oral religious tradition among most of America's black masses has great weight, with or without formal church involvements.

What does this authority consist of? The answer is, of necessity, quite complex, involving what might be called black definitions of the very word authority itself. For Africans and blackamericans alike, the authority of the tradition arose out of the authority of the *persons* or extended kinfolk who passed down the tradition in the first place. Traced to its ultimate source this means that God spoke to the ancestors, and they have faithfully transmitted what they heard. However, they neither heard nor transmitted distant abstractions. The hearing was in the everyday life of the people, so that its memorization was more inevitable than consciously compiled for communal posterity. The memory was reinforced by similar experiences and needs for insight, generation after generation. It was authoritative for reasons that needed not to be spoken.

When Africans were brought to America, the various traditions of religious wisdom, like the various languages, were lost as separate entities, but the life-stance of dependence on an oral tradition of wisdom remained. The prevailing tradition on the "turf" they now occupied was encouched in a Bible highly compatible at most points with the various oral traditions out of which they had come. Just as they would have adapted to and, in a sense, adopted the tradition of a conquering African nation, the slaves were not slow to appropriate creatively and to use for their own purposes a Biblical expression of their various but similar African heritages. For them it was important to know the prevailing tradition, just so they *could* make use of it, and they eavesdropped and otherwise "stole" it long before any widespread effort was made to teach it to them. Their selective acquisition served their own needs well, and it continued their longstanding tradition of a highly serviceable oral heritage, as illustrated by the fact that Moses was far more important to them than Paul.

For a traditional African the issue would perhaps be better stated as the importance, for personal and extended family survival, of the value systems and objects of trust of the wise and loving parents and ancestors. While overtones of social control are inevitable, the "proper"

way to behave in African culture is also the *easiest* way to enjoy life, to move about among persons freely, and to have their requisite respect for that movement. Greedy people are not really respected, no matter how materially secure, and lazy, irresponsible persons are equally out of step with the humane, spirit-oriented African tradition. The good traditional husband seeks a wife who, above all, will teach his children the traditional values and the traditional trusts which make possible the practice of the values.

In response, the traditionally raised African child has been so adored and kindly treated that the religious/cultural wisdom is accepted as highly desirable, the living guidelines needed, as provided by wise and loving informants. It is a natural, intuitive response, and not a matter of cold, rational evaluation. One just doesn't question mommas and poppas as kindly as they, unless the tradition has become clearly dysfunctional. And then, very often, the questioning can be made a joint enterprise involving parents and even patriarchs.

Black religion in America has followed, in its lines of real as opposed to formal communication, much the same pattern. Parents and preachers have had a printed volume called a Bible, but its main impact has been its presence and importance in the oral tradition. The force of a statement offered in any given situation will most likely be the fact that "All my life, my Momma and/or Poppa said . . .," and the fact that it was normative and successfully practiced in their lives, considered to be worthy of emulation. The natural quotation related to a life situation, as contrasted with the quote in a barber shop argument, is much more likely to be cited as coming from a known informant than to be backed up with the fact that it is printed in the Bible, or with chapter and verse. The basis is simply that the passage came to the speaker in just that oral manner, rather than from reading it. It was passed on and received in love, rather than quoted pharasaically or in a contest of one-upsmanship requiring prooftexts. The learning context was familial rather than formal, either legally or pedagogically.

Such quotations are kept not so much for quoting as for living. Rather than ritual laws and/or social controls, they are comparable to the wisdom a loving parent gives to a yard full of children trying to play on a see-saw. This equipment simply does not work well and yield the desired fun unless certain rules are followed. Children sense this, and follow the admonitions so they can have that desired enjoyment. This is the implied and almost never spoken authority of most of Black Religion, despite the puritanical and repressive rhetoric often used in formal worship.

Thus is black religion's authority drawn from and focused back into life. It is not concerned with scientific support for itself; it needs no literal technical explanations of its sacred accounts. A great preacher like Sandy Ray is not obligated to tell *how* Peter walked on the water. He just has to acknowledge some folks' intellectual concerns in clever

passing, and then get on with the more important concerns of what it means for life. (Cf. my *Black Preaching*, pp. 205-206.) That is its authority, its functional inspiration and insight as utilized and passed on by generations of saintly ancestors.

Just as black religion needs no scientific "authority," neither does it require the literal consistency in externals which is demanded by abstract reason. A phenomenon of West African culture and religion is an excellent illustration of the point. As mentioned in my *Black Belief* (p. 68), Yoruba religion is in general agreement about the origins of man and the meanings of human life, but each of the major towns observes a "belief" or, better, maintains an oral tradition, which has humanity beginning on its turf. No townspeople is prone, however, to argue with persons from other towns as to the accuracy of the traditional story of the town — the authority of its myth. This use of authority in the Western sense of monopoly on truth is not at issue. The authority of the story, after all, is its function and not its historicity as defined in some way people look at authority on other continents. In blackamerican tradition, there may not be so clear an illustration, but there is far less tendency to raise questions about the validity of *Momma's* Biblical quotations than is irreverently suggested in the song in "Porgy an' Bess:" "The things that you' liable to read in the Bible, they ain't necessarily so. The pervasive failure to raise this song's impish questions about Jonah and Methuselah is not caused by black ignorance of the canons of reason. The cherished Biblical tales simply are not expected to function in the arena of pure reason, and that arena itself is placed in properly correlative position alongside the experiential, the intuitive, and the need for aesthetic vehicles such as symbolic stories to express a higher integration of the whole truth, which is also more functional.

It hardly needs to be said that this approach to "scripture" is precisely the same as that of the early oral phase of the Bible itself, before it became "holy writ" — when it was still holy oral tradition. When God is referred to in the Old Testament as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, this is exactly parallel to the root African understanding of God as revealed in the tradition spoken down to the ancestors of another name. In a manner not formally referred to and almost unconsciously followed, blackamericans *still* state what they have to say seriously about faith and life on the authority of their own Abrahams. Whether it is the great Howard Thurman's devotional disciplines or Maya Angelou's more earthy insights, the wisdom of a great soul who was a grandmother is recorded. James H. Cone, the chief writer about Black theology to date, has put it well in his recent *God of the Oppressed* (p. 13) when he says of his parents that "They were in fact providing me with my only possible theological point of departure." I, who constantly catch myself preaching the texts that my layman father (a letter carrier with the post office) included casually in his comments, have said often that no person makes her or his own God. It is not possible truly to worship one's own

intellectual construct, so that one worships the God of one's ancestors, or one makes the serious pilgrimage of change to the ancestors of another. Cone is not stretching the point when he says "only possible theological point of departure." And this is how the original Bible, as well as the tradition of black religion, both early and now, have functioned and have been passed down by the ancestors. In the sense that there is "authority" in the religion of the black masses, this is it.

It may now be appropriate to state briefly what authority in black religion is not. For one thing, it is not the meticulous literalism of modern white fundamentalism, a tradition wed to the Bible as printed abstractions, having a legalistic or technical application undreamed of in the original oral tradition. Black religion holds to the firm understanding that print is never more than a substitute for the spoken word, an auxiliary to the more basic process in which a spoken treasure is lovingly transmitted from generation to generation, in and for life, rather than regulated by that which a very devil himself can abstract from print.

Although black religion avoids the highly inappropriate use of the Bible for a reference in matters scientific or technically historical, it also avoids the opposite extreme of stereotypical white intellectual religion, which pays very little attention to the Bible, or disguises an occasional Biblical insight in an abundance of other insight of apparently equal sacredness. For this extreme, the Bible is assumed to be out of touch with modern times, in need of interpretation beyond recognition of it as an important tradition in and of itself. The black oral approach to the Bible, on the other hand, takes the Bible very seriously and uses it as an eternally contemporary resource, employing it as relaxedly and naturally as one utilizes air. The evidence of the seriousness is not in the pious mention of chapter and verse but in the recourse to the tradition in time of need and the fact that it is ultimately normative in matters of life. There is no higher evidence of the assignment of "authority."

This traditional authority is never abstract, either by over emphasis on print or by promulgation of a concept of direct revelation placing too much stress on individual writers, in contrast with an extended family as both receivers and bearers of a tradition. Revelation is seen as through reliable persons and yet related by blood ties, a process in which today's hearer must be equally reliable, as an ancestor of tomorrow's yet unborn. In every generation the embodiment in life, especially under stress, is far more important than the mere capacity to recite the tradition. And rather than to *detract* from the Fundamentalist supernatural view of God as a comma-perfect revealer of Himself, it simply *adds* an aura of quasi-supernatural dignity to the ancestors who fought a good fight and kept the faith and passed it on. This approach to the sacred tradition brings authority out of the remote category of transcendent law-giving, into the more binding role of a personal legacy from one's own ancestors, a holy and serious "Word" from the God of the ages, rendered near and meaningful by the love and integrity of persons real and beloved.

No test of the validity of authority in the black religious tradition will be prone to show any less theologically "sound" or lively an application to the usual categories. For instance, black tradition is not stripped of concepts of the judgement of God just because the ancestors are loving. Stern readings of the final fate of ol' massa are common, and the personal application to blacks is well worded in the Spiritual which admonishes the black family to "min', 'cause you gotta give account at the judgement." As Old Testament revelation was superseded by the revelation in Christ, black religion has reserved its warmest and closest personal identification for Jesus, the Christ of God who was, like them, 'buked and scorned. From the faith considered as from the Fathers, to the Psalms' literally joyful noise in folk celebration of the goodness of God, to the healing and unifying presence of the Holy Spirit, whatever is "orthodox" Christianity at its living best can be found to thrive in the oral tradition of black religion. Yet black religion addresses itself to the most contemporary and practical of issues.

Of course, black religion has been discussed here in the ideal. Most of the black churches of America have a long way to go to live up to the cream of the insights of the heritage. But that cream has an applicability far beyond the black churches, for its use could preserve both Black and White congregations as instruments of both personal and social redemption in the otherwise perilous decades ahead. Avoiding the literalism and intellectual obscurantism of one extreme, the black stance manages, at the same time, to keep a rudder against the relativism and overly situational ethics of a rampant and oft misguided humanism. But rather than to destroy the valid concerns of each extreme, it fulfills them. Serious commitment to the Bible is maintained, and the deepest of humanist concerns for justice and peace and human dignity are fulfilled on sound ground. If seminaries and churches of all colors could recover or grow into a warm Biblical faith, responsive at the same time to the unquestionable gains of the intellectual revolution and the human concerns just mentioned, the golden age of both religion and society, black and white, might still lie ahead. And who knows but that the black model of oral tradition, reincarnating the Biblical model of the earliest years, might just be present in the world for such a time as this.

