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Contemporary Black Religion: In Search of a Sociology

In times of unusual tension and anxiety, social systems tend to produce fractures and polarities more readily than under less stressful conditions. Lines of cleavage develop along established or recognized "faults" or weak places in the social structure where the strain in normative social relationships is already endemic, or recurrent because of a confusion of values, or competing interests. Ordinarily, it might be supposed that religion, if not altogether exempt from such cleavages, would certainly be among the last of the major social institutions to show strain, especially if the long-established notion that the church is the leading conservator of established social values is valid. However, on closer inspection it is apparent that the values the church would conserve are often precisely those society seems ready to dispense with, so the church often finds itself on the tail end of social change. If, on the other hand, the church assumes the role of change agent, or departs too readily from established convention, the church may well find itself fragmented by dissenting factions, or suddenly depleted in membership. Certain mainline, characteristically "liberal" denominations are in the painful process of learning this by experience right now.

One area in which American religion has been most notably conservative is that of race. Separation by race at the congregational level has been a standard feature of religion for as long as there has been an African presence in this transplanted culture of the Anglo-Saxon peoples. For the first hundred years, the problem was obviated by the simple refusal of the colonists to consider the African slave a fit candidate for Christianity. It was said that the African was "too brutish, too ignorant, too unlike the English," to merit religious instruction. It was also argued that since he was a sub-order of the human race, the African probably had no soul in the first place. Nor did he have the moral capacity for religion: hence his indoctrination would be a waste of time and effort. But the most compelling argument was that the African was brought here to work. That ended the matter until 1701 when the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the missionary arm of the Church of England, found itself with several dozen missionaries in this country without anything for them to do. The S.P.G. missionaries had been sent to the Indians, but the Indians had rejected them and their doctrines. They then sued for permission to evangelize the Blacks, arguing that Christianity would reduce their proneness for lying and stealing and laziness, and would in fact make them as faithful unto their masters as unto Christ himself.

So it was that religion, American style, came to the African in America. It was a hundred years late, but who can say whether late is not better than

not at all? However, since that time, social polarity expressed as racial superiority has been more pronounced in the churches of America than in almost any other institution. Since the initiative of exclusion could only develop in the white churches, black protest was always a matter of response rather than assertion. The logical, perhaps the inevitable culmination of that response was in the creation of the Black Church as an in-group institution. In their own church black people could give expression to attitudes and understandings markedly different from what was expected and demanded of them by their white brothers and sisters in Christ. Nevertheless, it is still inconceivable to many Americans that Blacks may think of themselves as having a distinctive religion based on a corporate experience and a derivative world view different from, and independent of the traditional concepts of American protestantism. That the patterns of black *expression* of religious understanding are "different" is widely accepted as factual, but the possibility that the *content* of understanding may be significantly different is troublesome and unpopular with almost all white Christians, and with many Blacks. White Americans have traditionally viewed the religion of black people as a kind of child-like counterfeit of their own, albeit corrupted by certain "Africanisms" having to do with jungle rhythms and emotional license. Black people reject this view as patronizing and unenlightened, maintaining that at a minimum the black religious expression is misconceived by white people. There exists today a growing religious movement with strong representation at the cult and grass-roots level, (but with important leadership and support from an emerging cadre of black theologians and black college students), who see their religious interests and expressions as being "authentically black"—rejecting most black middle class religious expression as white religion in blackface. Black religion is claimed as the spiritual precipitate of the black experience, a peculiar encounter between God and man in history—and in this case, *black* man, in a setting of a white civilization. So far, not much has been done at the level of scholarship to establish the pros and cons of black religion as a distinctive religious phenomenon.[1] Practically all who embrace the idea, both at the level of practitioners and at the level of theology and exegesis, proceed from the premise that the existence and the distinctiveness of black religion are self-evidential, and that there remains only the necessity of theological clarification and exegesis to put the black experience in religious perspective so that its true meaning may be properly understood.

Now, it is a reasonable assumption that if black religion exists as a discrete religious phenomenon, then a sociology of black religion is possible, and if pursued ought to reveal something significant about the social implications of the religious understanding of Blackamericans. I do not here undertake to construct such a sociology, or even for that matter, to attempt a validation of its presumed existence. My task is a more modest one. It is to examine certain beliefs and practices of

[1] See Joseph Washington, Jr., *Black Religion.*

Blackamericans which have religious significance against a background of functional theory. My goal is a sort of prolegomenon to a functional theory of a possible sociological phenomenon, viz., "black religion."

There are, of course, certain pre-conditions which determine the availability of any phenomenon, or any set of phenomena to sociological inquiry. One such obvious condition is that the phenomenon which is to be the subject of inquiry must in fact exist. Another is that it must have an observable, palpable, objective existence available to the senses, which are the primary tools of scientific investigation. In consequence, the sociologist cannot tell you anything about souls, or ghosts, or demons, for example, because he has no equipment with which he can establish sensory contact with such phenomena, if indeed they do exist. But since sociology is a science which addresses itself to human behavior in general, and to human interaction in particular, the sociologist is prepared to observe, report and interpret *what people do who assume the meaningful existence of phenomena which may or may not be available to scientific observation and measurement.* The sociologist cannot establish the existence or non-existence of God, nor can he offer a reliable opinion as to whether God is black or white, good or evil, living or dead. He does not know where heaven is, nor can he tell you the temperature of hell, because he has not visited either place. But he can say something authentic about *the behavior of people who think they are bound for the one place or the other;* and he can say something meaningful about the system of beliefs and practices which may presuppose the existence of heaven and hell with their peculiarly distinctive populations, and how those beliefs and practices modify the social relations of a given society. The sociologist may be able to say whether such beliefs and practices are functional or dysfunctional in terms of a spectrum of values which represent the common denominators of social interaction. Given agreed upon standards of value and definition, he may ultimately be able to say whether certain patterns of belief and practice constitute "white religion," or "black religion," or no religion at all. He cannot tell you whether *any* religion is good or bad, for that is a question of value, and values cannot be scientifically determined. But he can make an informed judgment about whether particular kinds of behavior are consistent or inconsistent with the values upon which a given system of belief is said to be predicated. He can identify, measure and trace the source of values: What denominations reject abortion? How strong is the Baptist resistance to integration? Why do some churches bar women from the ministry? He can determine the influence of values upon behavior: How does the belief that balck people are cursed of God affect their reception in the Mormon church? And he can recognize value conflicts: A sign outside the First Church of Hallowed Heights says "All are welcome," but in fact, Blacks are not welcome and are turned away or excluded from intimate fellowship.[2]

The fact remains, however, that in some circles there is a curious

[2] See Glenn M. Vernon, *Sociology of Religion,* pp. 1-19.

objection to the sociological investigation of religious phenomena, and the social scientist who violates the taboos which operate to establish an off-limits status for religion runs the risk of being considered a meddler, a hypocrite or a crypto-infidel. Religion, it is often argued, can only be seen from the inside, i.e., from the point of view of the believer who is personally involved through his own faith. That is like saying that one has to be on trial before he can know anything about justice. Religion has an exterior, as does a system of law, and an observer on the outside may often gain a clearer insight into the behavior of people involved in meaningful interaction than the participants themselves. To want to know about religion from an external, "objective" point of view is neither to meddle, nor necessarily to waive one's right and interest to be both a participant and an observer. Builders do not stop living in houses because they happen to understand how houses are built.

The operating assumption regarding black religion is that if it exists as a distinctive religious phenomenon, then a sociology of black religion is possible and necessary, and that an indentification with the black experience is an invaluable asset in this interest. To generalize the validity of competent observation and analysis from "outside" the faith is one thing, however, while the critical ability to conceptualize and identify with its generative forces is quite another. Blackamericans have aways argued that the institutionalized structure of black-white relationships has produced stereotyped patterns of interaction and patterns of thinking which make it impossible for a white man with the very best of intentions to understand truly what it is like to be black in white America. When social relationships are characterized by extensive rigidity buttressed by an effective system of taboo, sympathy is not readily translated into empathy, in spite of good intentions. It would seem to follow that if empathetic understanding between blacks and whites is difficult or rare at the more common levels of social intercourse, in the religious sphere where the importance of *feeling* is escalated, and where the sources of understanding (and value) are rooted in the social experiences of the group, the hazards of external investigation are perhaps exaggerated. At some very critical junctures from which religious meaning and understanding may possibly be derived, the black experience is simply not the white experience, and the signals critical to analysis and interpretation may indeed be deflected by prior commitment to other values. Religion, of whatever color, is an empirical event, occurring in time and space, involving human interaction at a multiplicity of levels. While the God or the gods to which religions refer may be beyond the limitations of time and space, religion itself is earthbound. It is subject to the impingements of history. Whatever else it may be, it is a social phenomenon, and precisely because it is social, the study of religion, like religion itself, is impinged upon and conditioned by other forces at work in the society. Certainly this does not remove the study of the religious beliefs and practices of black people from the province of sociological research by non-black investigators. Such a notion would be repugnant to the notion of scientific objectivity. It does pose problems of communica-

tion and meaning for whomever is unable sufficiently to appropriate and internalize the peculiar nuances of the black experience at points where that experience is in conflict with, or oblivious of the understandings of some other culture.

It can be safely assumed that all religions derive from specific sociological needs and experiences, which is a way of saying that religion is one way in which a society moves to protect itself from itself, and from the vast unknown which may determine the nature and the urgency of its contingencies.[3] Professor Milton Yinger defines religion as:

> a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human associations. The quality of being religious, seen from the individual point of view, implies two things: first, a belief that evil, pain, bewilderment and justice are fundamental facts of existence; and second, a set of practices and related sanctified beliefs that express a conviction that man can ultimately be saved from those facts.[4]

In short, religion has a functional association. It is an effort to do for man what must be done to save him from the consequences of his dependency, his powerlessness. There are other kinds of efforts—political, economic and so on. The religious effort is distinguished by the ultimate quality of its concern. It is a system of beliefs and practices every society has found indispensable in mitigating, or at least in ordering the competition for scarce values, allaying hostility and encouraging forebearance; but it must also be concerned with answering the hard questions about suffering and death, about man's proper relationship to man and to God; about meaning in this life or some other. Most Blackamericans live under circumstances in which their contingencies are characteristically intensely religious. If religion did not exist it would be a logical black invention. As it does exist, it is a primary force of social cohesion, social integration, and personal security—for black people as it is for others, whatever the implications or claims for a unique "black" expression.

According to the late Professor Joachim Wach, every religion is theoretical, practical and sociological, i.e., a system of belief, a system of worship and a system of social relationships. It is the aspect of social relationships which is stressed in the religion of Blackamericans. A mature religion is a shared religion. Despite the mystics and others who may opt for solitude and contemplation,[5] it is very difficult for an individual to carry on a religion all by himself. Indeed, it is precisely at the point that man meets man and tries to work out some arrangement for sharing the earth that the need for religion and its concommitant system of moral values seems to arise. When Thomas Hobbes postulated a "state of nature" in which every man's interests focused on his own survival, and in which life was "solitary, mean, nasty, brutish and short," he

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[3] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.*

[4] J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion,* p. 7.

[5] Cf. Ernst Troeltsch on mysticism in *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches.*

undoubtedly had in mind an existence so primitive as to be devoid of even the most elemental evidences of religion. An ordered state presupposes a religion, for religion is the *sine qua non* of any civilized society. Certainly it is not necessary that everyone in a given society embrace religion, but the fact that some do makes possible the kind of society in which those who do not can survive.

There are about thirty million black people living in the United States, and for most of them life is solitary, nasty, mean, brutish and short. We need not enumerate the evidences of this assertion; they are everywhere apparent, and few Americans are strangers to that fact. Blackamericans live, for the most part, in a sophisticated state of nature: their solitariness is called alienation; meanness is poverty; nastiness is differential treatment; brutishness is their daily experience; and the prospects of a short life may be for many the only redeeming value of having lived at all. This would seem to constitute a fertile soil for prophetic religion. James Cone argued that:

> there can be no theology of the gospel which does not arise from an oppressed community. This is so because God in Christ revealed himself as a God whose righteousness is inseparable from the weak and helpless in human society.[6]

and . . .

> In the black world, this is no time to take life for granted, since every moment of being is surrounded with the threat of non-being.[7]

We are not concerned here with theology as such, but rather with the religious enterprise to which the theology refers. We are unable to say whether the theological presentiments we have quoted are sound, as they are not subject to sociological verification. What we can say, and in fact what we do affirm, is that it would be strange indeed if a community of people living under the circumstances I have described did not develop religious conceptualizations supporting a theology not unlike that quoted. The best evidence suggests that the social aspects of religion and the act of worship are both prior to belief—which functions to give meaning and coherence to worship and association. The religion itself arises from the felt needs of a people, and the needs recognized by the people who believe themselves to be oppressed are predictable. Further they will find articulation in ritual, theology and all the direct or symbolic means by which man is capable of communicating his understanding.

This is probably a good point at which to return to a more precise definition of religion before considering more closely the possibility of a sociology of black religion. The definition of a thing sets the limitations of discourse and offers a reasonable assurance that there is a mutuality of understanding, whether or not there is agreement about that which is being discussed. There are many kinds of definitions; and each has value in the context for which it is best fitted.[8] If, for example, I talk about what

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[6] James H. Cone, *A Theology of Black Liberation,* pp. 23-24.
[7] *Ibid.,* pp. 45-46.
[8] Yinger, *op. cit.,* pp. 4ff.

religion *ought* to be, my definition is valuative, and I am telling you more about myself than I am about religion. I could say, for example, religion should be a kind of social eclecticism, borrowing selected values from the various segments of society and confirming them in faith and practice. Or I could say that religion ought to be whatever a man does when he is alone with what he recognizes as his Maker. You might agree on one count or another, but my imposition of personal values might leave you uncomfortable about whether I was talking about religion or about myself.

Some definitions are descriptive. We may attempt to define religion in terms of what we observe as religious beliefs and practices. If we did that, we might conclude prematurely that religion requires baptism by immersion, or that it involves confession, or handling snakes, or testifying or a literal interpretation of the Bible, or speaking in tongues or shouting in church. All of these are indeed descriptions of some practices of some religions, but this is not to say that any of them are essential to religion.

A strictly substantive definition would try to capture the essence of religion—that act or that belief with which no true religion can be without: Shall we say prayer? Or a house of worship? Or belief in a Supreme Being? Perhaps. But we would need to evaluate these beliefs or practices to determine whether others which are not considered religious perform similar functions for man.

Having paid my respects to other possibilities, I feel that I may now return to my own bias, mentioned earlier, which offers a definition of religion as an effort to perform certain functions for man. The focus is on process.

What is it that the Blackamerican's religion attempts to do for him? What is the critical function of his religion? Are these efforts and functions religiously unique? We can dismiss the claims of "black religion" without further consideration if its beliefs and practices are not significantly different from those of other religions. It is not enough that they happen to be practiced by black people if they have no distinctive worship, myth or theodicy, or if they do not incorporate a unique mythology, or a unique worldview or a specific interpretation of history from which their religious understanding derives. Conceivably, particular emphasis upon recognized values such as baptism, or proclamation for example, could make the case for a distinct denomination or sect within Christianity more plausible than that of a distinct religion.[9] On the other hand, the possibility of a genuinely distinctively "black religion" emerging from the same denominational structure of normative "white religion" should not be dismissed prematurely. The problem of evaluation is certainly less complex if observable differences are substantially greater than observable similarities with recognized religions, (such as between Christianity and Buddhism, for example), but a calculus of differences may be misleading if the essence of difference is

[9] See "Church and Sect" by Ernst Troeltsch, *op. cit.* Cf. Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual,* pp. 142ff.

overlooked. Let us look for a moment at group sharing which is a critical aspect of the black religious experience. But group sharing is a common function of most religions. At a minimum, sharing is necessary to keep the faith alive. But sharing takes on an intensified significance in the Black Church. Alienation from the larger society does not necessarily push the oppressed into each others arms. The Jews who were at Buchenwald and Dachau learned that in World War II. Indeed, the pressure from an outside power often generates self-deprecation and hatred within the oppressed in-group. This may be accompanied by displaced aggression, and the sense of powerlessness and fatality experienced by the oppressed may make for an irrational identification with the oppressor.

Religious sharing reduces the occasions for intra-group hostility and provides a rallying point for the experience of more positive feelings and attitudes. The sharing of worship is often the point of precipitation from which other forms of sharing may flow in consequence. Food shared in church functions may open the way for sharing on other bases. Money shared with the church may subsequently be shared directly with the sick and the needy. The *habit* of sharing which is an aspect of corporate worship performs a very obvious social function, and among the poor and indigent Blacks, sharing takes on exaggerated importance because the need for sharing and the benefits derived from it are themselves exaggerated. Religion and other human experiences modify each other. Man, says Peter Berger, is searching for order, a sacred cosmos—a meaningful life in a meaningful order, and "religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established."[10]

Every man is a culture-builder. Every man wants to participate meaningfully in shaping the society which in turn shapes him and deepens his possibilities. Chaos, that is to say, meaninglessness, is the void from which black people have been trying to escape since they first set foot in America. Hence, black religion is in part an attempt to escape the indignities associated with white men and white religion. But beyond that, it is also the struggle of black people toward a kind of self realization which cannot be accomplished in America under any other rubric. There is more at stake than the mere freedom of the body; more than mere physical survival. The chaos from which the black believer is trying to liberate himself has to do with his acceptance of himself as a true child of God, and with his sense of a primary responsibility to God rather than to man. He must be free to worship God according to his own inner light, and that freedom is impossible in the absence of reasonable self-determination, and reasonable self-determination can never be taken for granted in a racially biased society.

Black people believe in God in a very personal way, and this is a salient aspect of black religion. Black people conceive God as presently involved in their deliverance. This is the central message of "black liberation theology." The notion of God being a champion of the oppressed is not a casual understanding; it is an article of faith; a considered affirmation.

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[10] See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy.*

God is a mighty warrior, a Divine Paladin, fighting the forces of evil and oppression which compromise His people. The extraordinary odds black people have to confront everyday of their lives demands a loving God, but more than that, a fighting God—A God on a black horse, for the liberation of black people *is* God's liberation.[11]

All this seems to indicate that black religion presupposes a God, who if He is not black in the sense of physical identification with this particular religious community, He is at least black-oriented in the sense that He is aware of their condition and assumes the leadership in setting things right. The net effect, the social function of having such a God, is of course group solidarity. Divine leadership has always been of supreme organizing value in dealing with social and political problems. Moses knew this. Muhammad knew it. Charles Martel knew it. It is not enough to ask "If God is for you, who can be against you?" One must also ponder the question, "If God is for you, must you not also be for yourself?" God liberates his peoples not only that they may be personally free from the physical onerousness of bondage, but more importantly, that they may be free to serve and worship Him. In short, that they may be responsible and accountable. The major black insurrectionists against slavery were deeply religious people. Nat Turner saw himself as God's instrument of liberation for a people who could not respond properly to God so long as they were in chains. David Walker urged revolt because he considered slavery inconsistent with God's expectations for manhood.

The promotion of ethnicity is a function religion has performed for many other cultural groups, the most notable being the Jews, ancient and contemporary. Black ethnicity is the celebration of black culture and the black experience. It is the appreciation of black people for what they have been, and what they are, and what they can become. Black ethnicity is an enlightened consciousness of kind, and a willingness to recognize value in one's own people and one's self, and to find security in being what you are and what you must be rather than risking psychological derailment in the search for approval from some group which may be hostile to your very existence. Since religion is a prime carrier of man's culture, that is to say, his social heritage, black religion bears an unusual significance to the spirit of black ethnicity.

W.E.B. DuBois made famous the theory of "double consciousness," a psychological phenomenon with which Blackamericans 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 why contemporary Blacks reject the term "Negro." For them it has pejorative connotations, in addition to being misinformative. 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

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[11] See James Cone, *op. cit.*

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 ordinarily 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 peculiarly his own, and not readily subject to white refraction. The 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 be-littled 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 churches and sanctions the ritual patterns developed in the churches of the black experience which were completely 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 ethnically 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 rather extensive spectrum of ritual behavior in the American religious enterprise.

Let us look at the situation from another perspective. Culture may be conceived as the characteristic body of knowledge, beliefs and values defining a given social cosmos which tends to be replicated, with limited modification, in successive generations. Since religion is an important part of culture, and since black people constitute an established sub-culture in the American social complex with a distinctively different set of life experiences from that of the white majority, it is reasonable to expect that the religious beliefs and practices of the black subculture may vary from those of the white overculture, and may indeed refer to values not recognized, or of low priority in what may be referred to as white religion. Social theory would want to identify those beliefs and practices precisely, and would want to know what part they may play in the maintenance of the social system. The complexity of the problem is exaggerated because the Blackamerican is part of two cultures and two social systems, and what is functional to the maintenance and the integration of one may well be dysfunctional to the other, and may affect the patterns of social relations between the two entities as well. We should also look for the ways in which black religion contributes to the adaptation of its practitioners to environmental demands, and what opportunities it provides for the fulfillment of expressive needs, the need

to act out emotions or to channel them toward safe, or creative dimensions.

If, as most sociologists seem to agree, it is the ethnic groups that are the important carriers of religion,[12] and if religion is an "effort to perform certain functions for man" aimed at reducing the odds in his life-long struggle with the problems of existence,[13] we may logically expect to find the level of religious commitment in the black community comparatively high and exaggerated in its intensity. There is a theory that there is an inverse correlation between church-oriented religion and involvement in the work processes of our modern industrial society, and this theory may shed some light on the nature of black religiosity. Certainly the religious activities of most Blackamericans are overwhelmingly church-oriented and church-related; and certainly the black involvement at meaningful levels in modern industrial society is quite minimal. A look at current unemployment statistics will quickly confirm this. Nevertheless, the case for a distinctive black religious expression need not turn necessarily on its "churchiness," nor does the Blackamerican's marginal place in industrial involvement provide a fully adequate experience from which a distinctive religious enterprise may likely develop.

This theory sheds no light whatever, for example, on the religious behavior of black college students who are not ordinarily considered candidates for low level industrial involvement. Yet, the Fifties and Sixties were characterized by the marked hostility of black college students towards the Black Church, which was accused of being other-worldly, uninvolved, and a chief instrument of black pacification. Only the Black Muslims were considered exceptions worth note. However, by the middle Seventies, a remarkable about-face had taken place, and black campuses across the country were experiencing an uncharacteristic religious revival. Complicating the explanation was the fact that the focus of this surge in religious interest was not in the so-called "liberal" or "middle-class" denominations or churches, and not in those which had proven themselves in the civil rights activities of the past two decades—but in the more conservative pentecostal communions which are characteristically withdrawn from social confrontation and civil involvement.

This is a contemporary phenomenon still to be investigated and understood, but its existence seems to suggest quite clearly that the critical explanations for black religion lie more deeply embedded in the peculiar black experience rather than in the common American experience we share with others.

The black experience is the unique body of events—cultural, historical, personal and vicarious which, religiously speaking, constitutes the black pilgrimage from home and freedom in Africa, 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

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[12] Cf. Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion,* p. 34.

[13] *The Scientific Study of Religion,* pp. 6-7.

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, but black people would survive the experience and in time they would understand it.

The peculiar endowment insuring their survival has been identified as something called "soul." Soul has a popular connotation somewhat less comprehensive than its more technical understanding, 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—the distillate of that whole body of events and occurrences, actual and derivative which went into the shaping of reality as the Blackamerican 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. It is the sustaining force which made black survival possible—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. Soul 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. 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 where the last clutch of self-respect would otherwise have succumbed to the expediences of staying alive. It is the reaffirmation of the black man's estimate of himself. It is probably an ineffable experience—incomprehensible beyond the group, but for those who share it, soul is the medium through which the dignity, the art and the unity of black people are communicated. It is the enduring ego of the race.

George Simmel identified religion as *one* of the forms which human relations assume, although a wide variety of human interaction may be considered proto-religious, or "may harbor a religious element."[14] "In many important instances," Simmel explains, "the same content which previously or at some subsequent period was borne by other forms of human relations, and that it is merely a change, as it were, in the aggregate condition of these relations when instead of purely conventional, it becomes religious."[15] The concept of soul as a representation of

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[14] See Georg Simmel, "A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion," *The American Journal of Sociology,* Nov., 1905, pp. 359-376. (Reprinted, May, 1955).

[15] *Ibid.*

what is considered unique, or at least uniquely valuable to the black experience, would seem to be consistent with the belief that there may be a religious quality to many kinds of human interaction which do not originate from a religious motivation or a spiritual stimulus. For to have soul includes the capability of an emotional response to a common group experience which is interpreted as vital to the group's self concept and its understanding of its place in history. Soul, then, is an ethnic concept, a product and a creator of black culture. It is the art, the music, the religion and the style of Blackamericans. It is the peculiar language of the black experience because it is the embodiment of that experience, and it evokes an empathetic response in whomever is capable of valuing and affirming that experience with understanding. It cannot be separated from religion because the whole black experience assumes the character of a religious pilgrimage. Hence, soul is an ethnic experience which makes an important contribution to the sub-culture of black America in general, and to the Blackamerican's religious predisposition in particular. If the black religious expression is not wholly independent of the white overculture, it must be substantially so because of the independent sources from which it in part derives, and because of the autonomous values incident to the development of the black experience. Soul is black people being themselves, celebrating their own significant experiences in their own way. Religion and soul are indistinguishable from each other.

Every religion is the common property of the group, and every neonate enters a society in which religion is an important agent of socialization. The child learns who he is and what life holds for him, and why, as much through religious teachings, or teachings that are para-religious, or which are religiously derived as from any other source. A black religion would seem to be especially functional as an aspect of the socialization process of black people as they confront the realities of our kind of society. In times past the white religion offered to black people was a counsel of accepting what was unacceptable with love and patience and hope. In a hostile society where all power was concentrated in the hands of the white majority, love was diffident at best, and the options for anything other than hope and patience were rather limited for black people. Perhaps in some other world at some other time things might be different, but the critical concern was present survival, so the counsel of hope and patience was probably functional in its time. God and history were made to function as allies to white domination as justifying the black man's condition while holding out the hope for deliverance—in God's good time. In consequence, survival, physical and psychological, is still a critical concern of most black people, and an adequate religion must give this interest a paramount place in its hierarchy of values. But a religion adequate for these times must also offer a supporting counsel far different from the traditional one of hope and patience, or so it would seem. Certainly, a scant decade ago, instead of acceptance and avoidance, confrontation and engagement would have been more in keeping with the militant spirit of the times. That is why the present withdrawal into pentecostalism raises such serious problems of sociological analysis.

Nevertheless, it seems clear that black religion probably fulfills some of the more critical requirements looked for by sociologists of religion as indices of defacto religion. At a minimum, a unified system of beliefs and practices which attempt to relate the black believer to whatever is ultimate, and whatever is conceived as affecting his situation of contingency is implicit in the concept of soul. Further, the celebration of the black experience, and the belief that "black is beautiful" and "what Blacks do in religious ritual has value"—which is an aspect of the same syndrome is in large part an effort aimed at uniting black people in a cultural (moral) community, a social cosmos in which life takes on meaning and makes sense from the black perspective, no matter how it may be viewed from the outside. It is the rejection of the implications of cultural dependency as appropriate or necessary for the existence of black people. Any possible black religion will be by definition the Blackamerican's answer to *white* religion—a response to the demeaning and exclusivistic practices inherent in an institutionalized racism which has traditionally ignored or transcended the moral requirements of the faith. It may very well embody a denial, however implicit, that the God of the white oppressor is the same God of the black experience. More certainly it will deny that God is limited to the racist character implied in white theology, art, ritual or moral practice. Finally, any possible black religion will be soul from the souls of black folk, a creative expression of the black experience in America, searching for the enlightenment and the power to transcend its own accident of color in a society where color is no less the supreme value in religion that it is in the secular world.