

BY C. ERIC LINCOLN\*

## The Black Church in the American Society: A New Responsibility?

Since it is the American society which constitutes the principal setting for the Black Church, it is logical to begin a discussion of their interrelationships with some comment on the nature of that society. This raises an immediate problem, for the "American society" is not one, but many. It is not monolithic, but pluralistic. It is, in fact, a most remarkable example of a societal conglomerate—an extraordinary conglutinate of heterogeneous subcultures. It is held together by a common commitment to what is believed to be a peculiarly insightful understanding of the meaning of life, and a concomitant formula for the effective realization of that meaning. Critical to this national understanding is a prevailing religious consciousness vitalized by an ethic which gives dignity and purpose to human existence, and which purposes to order human behavior in conformance with that principle. This Judeo-Christian convention (in which the Black Church finds a distinctive participation), is the organizing matrix of the American social cosmos. Indeed, it was the primary impetus which spurred the founding of this civilization in the first place, and it remains the principal structural factor defining and uniting the contemporary American society.

There are, of course, other factors of definition and coherence which contribute to the integrality of the American cosmos: the democratic ideal and the theory of the equality of persons is one. The sacredness of human life, which has both religious and political derivations, is another. The notion of responsibility, both personal and social, is yet another. The roots of these conventions are not always clear, for our secular experiences and learnings often find their sanctions in the understanding of the sacred, and the requirements of religion may as often find secular adoption irrespective of commitment to the faith. Moreover, there are certain legal conventions which operate to assign religion and government mutually distinctive spheres of interest and operation in the effort to preclude the possibility that any particular sect or creed will have an undue or privileged impact in the ordering of society, but that every sect and every creed shall have equal access to the public. This in itself becomes a factor of vast significance in the structuring of the social order, and, as we shall discover presently, it has a peculiar significance for the future and the relevance of the Black Church in America.

While these several particulars called to your attention are not by any means exhaustive, a critical introduction to the structuring of America as

---

\*Dr. Lincoln is Professor of Sociology of Religion, Department of Religion, Duke University.

a social cosmos must certainly deal with the factors I have mentioned as prominent in the definition of our society. To put it more explicitly: (1) racial, ethnic and cultural pluralism; (2) a common acceptance of the Judeo-Christian tradition as the normative religion for America; (3) a democratic polity presupposing the legal equality of persons and aimed at government by the people; (4) the paramount value of human life; and (5) the separation of church and state are all among the cardinal social facts or values which give structure to and which determine the dynamics of the society we live in. However, it should not be necessary to remind ourselves that even with so selective a characterization we are talking about America as an ideal type and not as a consistent reality. The characterization is "true," but only in the abstract. What our society is in fact at any given moment will probably be an imperfect approximation of some of all I have said it is, but a great deal more. And a great deal less. America has yet to live up to its ideals, but the ideal existence which never was will continue to provide identity and characterization for the American people, because this is the way Americans insist on seeing themselves.

Despite the public self-assurance of the American character, one of the ironies of the American self-concept is the strong element of uncertainty that lies buried in our private reckoning. As a people, Americans are not given to the admission of failure, but the louder we proclaim our perfection, the more insistent seems our need for corroboration from significant others. Even in our developmental years when we were committed to the notion of a perfect society here in the West—a city set on a hill, as it were, we were so certain, but still we longed to be told how right we were. Yet, when Alexis de Tocqueville offered his commentary on American democracy after a half century of effort, America was titillated by his attention, but there is little evidence that his criticism of such gross divagations as human slavery was taken to heart. A hundred years later, still in search of some external confirmation of our national self-image, but unshaken in our belief in American manifest destiny, on the eve of World War II we imported Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish social scientist, to examine the American society and tell us what we were like. Myrdal was considerably more painful in his assessment than de Tocqueville. He shocked America with the startling news that we had a "dilemma." The dilemma, he said, derived from the conflict between the high-sounding Christian precepts embodied in the American self-image as compared to the way Americans really behave.

That problem is still with us, and apparently, so is the national masochism which is excited by continental notice and evaluation. In recent times we have also had some startling evaluative commentary from our own Ambassador to the United Nations. But while Mr. Young's remarks have usually stirred international comment, at home we have scarcely heard what he said above the din of denunciation for having said it. But then there is a well-known adage about where a prophet finds his honor (and his audience). Perhaps that is why we have preferred to listen to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who in strict keeping with the adage found no

honor at home in Russia, but who seems to be saying some of the same things about us that some of us have discovered for ourselves.

In the now celebrated 1978 Commencement address he gave at Harvard, Solzhenitsyn, a Russian novelist who now lives at Cavendish, Vermont, decided to share his views on America. They were not complimentary. He chided America for glorified technological achievements which do not redeem our moral poverty. He accused us of a preoccupation with the worship of man and his material needs, while our sense of responsibility to God and society grows dimmer and dimmer. Here in America man has become the center of everything that exists, and against this terrible "abyss of human decadence" which he says is characterized by the "misuse of liberty," American society appears to have little defense. Mr. Solzhenitsyn charges that we have prostituted our vaunted freedom for the cheap satisfaction of whims and instincts. There is a serious decline in courage, particularly "among the ruling groups and the intellectual elite," he charges, and the stage is set for the triumph of mediocrity. America, he concluded, is spearheading the decline of the West.

George Bernard Shaw once said of the American people that "to rouse their eager interest, their distinguished consideration and their undying devotion, all that is necessary is to hold them up to the ridicule of the rest of the universe." Shaw's acerbities notwithstanding, Solzhenitsyn's analysis of contemporary American society is bound to arouse a certain queasiness among all those who have looked with dismay at the proliferated raveling of the social fabric and become a party to it by default. Solzhenitsyn's assessments of our value system and its expressions are those of a careful observer with an acute, well-trained mind. They do not want for credibility, and yet because Solzhenitsyn lacks the personal experience that comes from being a sustained part of this society—i. e., born and reared an "American," his critics would like to dismiss him for an alleged preoccupation with the obvious. They belittle his complaints about the pollution of entertainment and literature with pornography; or his impatience with "the revolting invasion" of privacy by the news media; or the trauma of our "T.V. stupor" and the "intolerable music" which saturates the air waves; or our "mass living habits," or the primary concern of the Western press with "gossip, nonsense and vain talk."

All these, Mr. Solzhenitsyn's critics would have us believe, are merely the bubbles of effervescence which mark the chemistry of a healthy, free, pluralistic society. To be an American, it is argued, is to understand all this and to accept it, not as an index of deterioration, but rather as an evidence that the dynamics of freedom have found the fullest possible expression, and that an admittedly imperfect society is operating at the maximum efficiency possible consistent with the personal and corporate freedom we demand and cherish. "If Solzhenitsyn had talked to us," said one distinguished critic, "he would not have spoken those sentences at Harvard," for "he reproves us for faults which would not be faults if he could talk to his neighbors . . ." This, it seems to me, is precisely the

kind of causticity which has brought us to the sad state of affairs Solzhenitsyn decries. Such agonized sophistry can only illustrate the degree to which the super-thinkers in whose favor we have too often abdicated our own initiative have themselves succumbed to the dubious exercise of thinking in a vacuum with no reference (and no light) beyond themselves. In consequence, we have no right to claim surprise that the leadership of our seminal institutions is polluted; and that it is enervated by an intellectual cultism which invents its own peculiar moral perspectives and then proceeds through the use of its vast influence in education, in government, in the communications media, and too often in organized religion to ordain for the less sophisticated masses some alluring and doubtful "alternatives" for the enduring values they used to know.

The irony is that what is being sold is not new, but is in fact the most primitive of philosophical gewgaws. We are invited to believe that the only real responsibility man has is to himself and his own gratification, and that all moral alternatives are equally valid since they have no reference beyond the individual. Cloaked in an astonishing array of deceptive arguments, this ancient hedonism is no less destructive for all its cleverness, and no less vulgar for all the notables who are associated with it. But it *is* confusing, for we live in a time when the issues of personal and social intercourse are exceedingly complex, and the parameters of personal and social responsibility seem to recede with each new problem we are called upon for resolution.

If the people are confused, their confusion is not incidental. The price of freedom is always the risk that it may be corrupted or taken away by perverse ideologies which take advantage of it. The declension of great civilizations is characteristically initiated by internal assault on their systems of value. If the eternal verities by which men live can be put at issue, if the conventions by which society is ordered can be forced into question, if the good, the true and the beautiful can be circumscribed with doubt, if that which is patently and inherently evil and degrading can be successfully masqueraded as a reasonable alternative to that which affirms human life, human dignity, and human responsibility, there is no need for armies of invasion. The civilization where this can happen will self-destruct.

We have never been close to realizing the notion of "righteous empire" which excited the Puritan founders of this civilization. The moral and spiritual impetus which gave leadership and direction to the birth of this nation was in substantial default from the beginning, but our initial deficit was not so much a lack of vision as it was a lack of courage. Now we appear to lack both. Our minds are keener, our perceptions are more acute, our information is more prodigious, but our retreat from responsibility is all the more pronounced. Those we have traditionally looked to as guardians of our more civilized efforts—those Solzhenitsyn calls "the ruling elite," have too often chosen silence rather than truth lest they lose membership in the cult of paladins intent on the prostitution of "personal freedom" as a license for the destruction of settled social

values. We have still to learn, if we are lucky, that there *is* evil in the world, and that to compromise with evil in any of its guises is to be destroyed by it. When the beast walks among us, we will either restrain it, or it will hold us captive in our own houses. A system of values without consistency is a topsy turvy system of values, and patently incapable of ordering a society so complex as our own. Perhaps this is what Solzhenitsyn means when he says that it is our devotion to the letter of the law rather than its intention which paralyzes the country's ability to defend itself against the corrosion of evil.

It is this corrosion that is the business of the Church. It is the business of the whole Church, but if the White Church will not address it, then the Black Church *must* address it, or we will all be partners in default.

*The Black Church: Beyond the Parochial*

There are those who insist that there is nothing wrong with America which will not be right tomorrow, or the day after. In such an assertion we might all find consolation except that it is not an expression of faith in either the benevolence of God nor the perfectability of man, but is a consignment to the blind vagaries of chance and change. It means simply that change is the only reality, and that given enough time, blind chance and inevitable change will alter every human condition irrespective of human need or human desire. The capitulative hedonism generated by such a philosophy is an undisguised invitation for the abdication of responsibility, for it negates all moral and ethical restraint as an antiquarian exercise in futility.

It is not that we do not know better. The reality (and the significance) of change are undebatable, but in our saner moments we know that change is but one aspect of reality, not its sum total. We know too that while change as a process is an inevitable feature of the cosmic order, change in the human condition and in human relationships is a feature of the human initiative and the Divine Imperative. In consequence, man has a continuing responsibility to exercise his initiative in the interest of his moral and spiritual elevation, and that of his fellowman. If he abdicates this responsibility, it is not only at *his* peril but the whole society is endangered in consequence. Civilizations wax and wane, rise and fall in terms of man's recognition of his responsibility to impress the ribbon of change with his own moral and spiritual imprimatur. This is what is meant by the humanizing of the social order: man struggling against the odds to be his better self in the interest of a more just, a more peaceful, a less brutal and a less vulgar condition of corporate human existence.

The Church is the primary institution through which man recognizes most clearly his moral and spiritual obligations, and by means of which he seeks to maximize his human initiative and outreach. If change is a critical factor of human existence, then the distinctive feature of such an institution is its ability to transcend change, providing continuity for certain cardinal values for succeeding generations. An institution is a very useful cultural invention for it has a transcendent quality which makes of the past, the present and the future one continuum of experience. It

persists through change as an island of stability denying the inexorable-ness of the social flux. The Black Church is such an institution. Born of the intransigent faith of an oppressed people and nurtured in their determination to make a distinctive witness for God in spite of their distress, the Black Church has thus far weathered the historic conventions which called it into being. Unlike its counterparts in the American mainstream, it seems relatively unconfused about its spiritual commitments and its moral responsibilities. The Black Church has its problems, but they do not appear to be problems of the faith, or the interpretation of the faith in the context of social change.

If the American social cosmos is in the state of deterioration it is alleged to be, and if, for whatever reason or reasons, the leadership traditionally provided by structures of power and prestige may no longer be depended upon. Ultimately, we must confront the question already implicit in the historic role of the Black Church in the black experience—that is, whether the Black Church can now free itself up for a less parochial leadership, and whether or not it will. A look at some of the factors by which the Black Church is commonly thought to be conditioned may be instructive.

First of all, despite its ethnic distinctiveness, its cultural heritage and its singular traditions, the Black Church is not an island unto itself. It is emphatically a part of the main. It is the spiritual embodiment of the black experience, but that experience is constituent to a larger social and cultural reality. Inevitably, this raises the question of whether the Black Church is not part and parcel of the prevailing social ethos, and if not, whether it must not be so receptive to, or vulnerable to those significant forces which operate to make the larger society what it is as to effectively nullify its claim for distinctiveness. This argument implies that whatever is characteristic of white America must be replicated in the black community, and more specifically that the lassitude which troubles the contemporary White Church will be found in counterpart in the contemporary Black Church.

The logic of this argument falls apart when recognition is given to the prevailing conventions which have always conditioned social intercourse between the black subculture and the white overculture in America. While it is true demographically that each group is a part of the common "main," it is also true culturally and psychologically that there is a spectrum of individuation which ranges from what is the same or similar, to what is quite different and distinct. For example, there is no disputing that Blackamericans and white Americans share the same value structure in the abstract, for both groups are informed by the same Judeo/Christian ethic which sustains that value structure to a significant degree. Similarly, they share the same political ideals concerning the equality of persons and the sanctity of life and freedom. But it is the interpretation brought to the value structure in day-to-day human intercourse which contributes to the distinctiveness of one group from the other. Again, while it is true that all cultures borrow freely from each other, in America the process is seriously inhibited by the established conventions of racial separation.

This often results in a serious interregnum between what white people are thinking and doing and what their counterparts in the black community are thinking and doing. We may conclude then that despite a common ground of existence with certain overlappings of cultural experiences, neither the Black Church nor the black community is a replication of its white counterpart, but each exists, and each persists in its own distinctiveness. If this were not so, there would be no occasion to speak of a "Black Church" in the first place.

The fact that the Black Church is distinctive raises another issue: for many reasons, both historical and contemporary, the constituency of the Black Church is for all practical purposes exclusively black. This is a fact of extraordinary significance. In a society where black leadership has been traditionally restricted to a black following, is it realistic to suppose that in the face of this convention that in a time of social crisis the Black Church can develop a significant leadership for all Americans? The answer is "yes." It is realistic, and it is not so far-fetched as it appears at first consideration. While it is true that the tradition of inevitable white leadership for white people, (and white-controlled leadership for black people), is deeply rooted in the conventions of white supremacy in America, those conventions have not enjoyed monolithic application, or success, especially in religion. Long before the Civil War, on at least some occasions North and South, Blacks pastored white congregations, mixed congregations, and in at least one or two instances were headmasters of schools catering exclusively to whites.

In more recent times, Father Divine had a substantial following of educated, wealthy white suburbanites; and Martin Luther King was the acknowledged leader of tens of thousands of whites of every religious conviction. Outside the religious sphere the willingness of contemporary whites to follow attractive and competent black leadership is even more remarkable—as is attested by the ever-increasing numbers of black mayors and other elected officials who participate in the responsibility of government. There is demonstrated respect for black leadership in sports, in the military, in politics, in academic administration, in news media and in church administration in some white denominations with black constituencies, and in many other areas of common interest. I see no reason to believe that this trend will not be escalated as the competency and the responsibility of black leadership continues to be demonstrated in practice, and established in social experience. There was never a time, either in the Church or out of it, when black leadership was not available across the arbitrary lines of race; only the opportunity to offer it was lacking.

The presumption of leadership capacity raises an old issue the Black Church will have to face whatever its plans may be for the future. It is an issue which grows more insistent as the years go by and new generations of young Blacks search for meaning and relevance in the churches their parents knew. It is the issue of professional preparation—not for leadership in the world, but for leadership in the Church—for the Black Church is itself inevitably in the world. We have a great and glorious

tradition of competent, even prominent church leaders, who having been called of God needed no more than to leave off the gathering sycamore fruit, or to have their lips touched by the divine coal to go forth and prophesy in God's name. Indeed, the Black Church had its genesis—not in the ivied halls or the cloistered forums of the universities, but in the faith of the unlettered black men who heard themselves called to stand before their neighbors gathered in the swamps and the bayous, there to preach God's promised liberation. Preach they did, though they had never seen a book, and though no man taught them the art of homiletics. Their theology was a living experience intuited during their prayerful walks with God among the endless cotton rows. It generated a faith on which the people built and created for themselves a great tradition and a great Church. It is that same Black Church of which we are so justly proud and in which our confidence is lodged for today and tomorrow.

However, success sometimes creates its own dilemmas. In the world that gave birth to the Black Church we were all one in the poverty of what we knew about the world beyond the confines of the plantation. Education was forbidden. The divine inspiration which informed the preacher and placed him far above the understanding of his flock ensured his leadership, his competence and his usefulness. When freedom came, the Black Church built schools to educate the people in general, and the ministers in particular. Thereafter, for many generations the minister not only had the preparation of Divine calling, he was also commonly the best educated man in the community, and often a teacher or headmaster as well as a preacher. The wide availability of public education coupled with certain conventions which have kept the ministry one of the most respectable, (but the lowest paid of the traditional professions), augmented by the time honored tradition of being called to preach from whatever previous condition or interest, have all contributed to the problem of a growing educational imbalance between the Black Church and its leadership. If this trend continues, the Church may first of all become alienated from its youth thereby jeopardizing its generational continuity and compromising its options for an expanded role in human affairs.

A church without youth is of course a church without a future. The Black Church is swiftly approaching a point of crisis in this regard. The present leadership, whatever its level of preparation, has the advantage of being "in," and being for the most part accepted, but its mobility will be increasingly proscribed. The number of black youth in our colleges and universities has more than doubled in the last ten years, and is growing. If these young people are to be church-ed, it is fair warning to say that it will be increasingly hard to provide for them from traditional sources. Unless they can be pastored by men to whom they feel a more comfortable affinity, they may well be lost to more compatible interests or institutions. Nor is it merely a matter of the incompatibilities of youth and age. The world has changed, and so have the priorities the Church needs to address beyond what is purely spiritual. Not least among the new critical concerns of the Black Church is the fact that its constituency is now essentially

urban rather than rural, with the extraordinary shift of emphasis this requires if the needs of the people are to be met. The effective black preacher today and tomorrow need not be "erudite," but he does need to be "smart" beyond the level of simple mother wit and dedication. He must be *trained* to cope as well as to give leadership in a world where there are few simplicities remaining.

Let us look at another factor. From its inception the Black Church has nurtured a distinctive spiritual ambience which has been unique to its own traditions. Much has been written about an alleged "hortatory boisterousness" or "flamboyance" in the pulpit, or about "exhibitionism" in the pews. Observers have been much exercised in their efforts to find the proper antecedent patterns of behavior in the African bush or in the frontier churches of America. Generally they have missed the point, for what they have been searching for is style rather than quiddity, *mode* rather than *mood*. In consequence, the essence of black worship has slipped through their fingers, and the interiority of the Black Church is improperly appreciated beyond its communion because it is improperly understood.

Even those whose heritage is the Black Church have not always understood that heritage, and they have sometimes been confused by the apparent conflict between black styles of worship and other traditions they consider to be more sophisticated. However, as more and more racial shibboleths have lost their relevance and their potency, and as more and more Blacks have matured into the security of self-appreciation, the uniqueness and the particularity of the Black Church as a valued spiritual heritage has become a major factor in black identity. However, that is not the whole story. The issue is not so tidily resolved because not all black people see the celebration of ethnicity as "progressive." For them, the heritage of the Black Church is essentially a "slave heritage," and the celebration of that heritage is the perpetuation of stereotypes we should be anxious to be rid of. Whatever calls us back, holds us back, they say.

This is not the occasion to address that argument, but it is one which has nevertheless a certain relevance to our present concerns. It raises the question of whether the inherent nature of the Black Church is such that a substantial role in national leadership across racial lines is not quite impossible, or at the very least unlikely. If the intrinsicality of the Black Church does not project itself, its meaning and appreciation beyond a defined experience, how can it ever be more than parochial in its influence?

There are at least two answers to this. Every religion was at one time "parochial," Christianity itself being no exception. It is only through the confidence derived from solid acceptance from the original in-group that the evangelistic enterprise takes fire and finds effectiveness. But the parochial fold need not extend to all who are the logical heirs of a particular heritage. Christianity originated in the Jewish community and its initial cult of true believers were all Jews. Yet, when the larger Jewish community rejected this new interpretation of the prevailing faith, the Christian evangels found receptivity for the "good news" in the world of

the gentiles. The enormous spread of Mormonism in our own time is a somewhat different variation on the same theme. The Church of the Latter Day Saints was once the most parochial religion in America. However, having grown strong and confident at home precisely on the basis of their decidedly unique heritage and calling, when the time came to bid for world-wide acceptance and influence, the Mormons sacrificed the more obnoxious of their parochial views by "revelation" thus preparing themselves for extended influence in the world.

These examples may well be beside the point, for the leadership needed to return this country to a more reasonable conformance to its founding principles and to the fuller possibilities of a truly great civilization does not hinge on either the ambience or style of particular communions. These are but the superficials of the sacred commitments which are nurtured and tended by the Church. What is required is not necessarily a community bound together in style and ambience, but a community which shares a body of commitments aimed at humanizing a social order which seems intent upon its own dereliction. The same thing may be said to those who fear that the "fragmentation of the Black Church" is a constant challenge to its effectiveness. I do not see the Black Church as being fragmented so much as I recognize particular segments of the Church Universal pursuing the opportunity to witness under adverse circumstances bequeathed by certain exigencies of history. The history of religion in America is the history of particularized ministries to particularized needs. The whole Black Church is such a ministry. Possibly the time will come when the reformation of society will engender a reduced need for particularity in the ministry to the human spirit. When that happens, sectarianism will have no appeal and no function. In the meantime, there is some consolation in the fact that about 95% of the Black Church is in two or three denominational groups as compared with the hundreds of sects which divide the rest of the Church in America. Even three may be too many, but the prognosis for the future togetherness of the Black Church cannot be as discouraging as it may appear. As the Black Church moves toward the elimination of its sectarianism, there are many things the several communions can do together which will decrease feelings of alienation and promote in us the recognition of community which is shared in all other areas of the black experience. There are some challenges to the Black Church which are bigger than its internal differences. It is not necessary to compromise identity to meet those challenges in concert.

Finally, it must be recognized that America is not noticeably clamoring to be saved by the Black Church. If in fact this society can afford a "saving remnant," America is likely to look for it somewhere else, *anywhere* else other than in the black community. Would the Black Church not be unduly presumptive, then, in presuming to look beyond its limited traditional interests in a society which has at times scorned it, and which has always undervalued it? Is it not more realistic for the Black church to think small and stand tall in what its doing than to develop a spiritual megalomania which may be inconsistent with the skills and the resources

available, and which may in any case set the Black Church up for rejection and ridicule?

How the Black Church answers this question must depend ultimately on its sense of mission. But there is a respected tradition which says that "whom God calls to leadership, God gives a rod of authority." What has the Black Church going for it? What is the rod the Black Church has in *its* hand? At a minimum there would seem to be these three: grace, power and responsibility. Grace, because God knew this Church and nurtured it before it came from the womb of a troubled America. Power, because it has not been overcome by the social challenges, the "principalities" of this age. Responsibility, because it is God's witness in God's world, and this world has need of it. Taken together these may or may not add up to "authority," but they do imply some extrapolation of the present mission of the Black Church. There is a ministry to be met beyond the traditional mountains which have separated us from the rest of the world.

Perhaps it was not incidental that when God raised up a man to lead America through the racial crisis that had troubled us for more than a century, He did not turn to the wealth and power, the tradition and experience, the prestige and the glory of the establishment Churches in America. They had had their chance, and they had defaulted. But God raised up a leader from the Black Church, and now the problem is behind us. Perhaps God was trying to say something to America in general, and to the Black Church in particular.

Is anybody listening? Is the Black Church listening?