

A Critical Review of James Deotis Roberts' Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church

Introduction

Greetings and acknowledgements

Many of you are aware of the fact that Dr. Roberts was my teacher at Howard University Divinity School and also the first reader for my dissertation which resulted in my book, *Redemption in Black Theology* (Judson Press, 1979).

One might conclude, then, that my review of his book *Roots of A Black Future: Family and Church* will be influenced by those previous relationships. This is not the case. When I was researching and writing my dissertation on an occasion of my meeting with Dr. Roberts I felt compelled to inform him that I did not agree fully with all of the positions which he articulated in *Liberation And Reconciliation: A Black Theology*. Without hesitation he responded: "Brother Moyd my aim is to make scholars not disciples." That statement was liberating. (Of course, I was aware of the fact that "making scholars" depended upon the materials at hand.) That statement did provide the freedom for the stating of my disagreement with my teacher. I still enjoy that freedom as I review his book today.

My aim is to follow the guidelines suggested by another former teacher during my days at Howard Dr. James D. Tymes, namely.

1. Give a summary of the contents
2. Give my appraisal and critique of contents and
3. Give my summary and conclusions.

PREFACE

In his preface, the author tells us that the Black family and the Black Church have nurtured each other, and that his approach to the study of Black family and church will be theological. Reflections from other disciplines will assist in his presentation. "But the author is a theologian, so all of his instincts will be guided by that fact.

He sees his task as that of drawing out the "pedagogical, psychological, and social significance of the family for the sanity, health, and

* Pastor, Mount Lebanon Baptist Church, Baltimore, Maryland.

wholeness of Black people" and "to use theological discourse to express the deep significance of family and church in the experience and survival of Black people" (p. 8.).

His primary stated purpose is to open up important theological ecclesiastical consideration for Black Theology. The book would also represent much of his growing vision since he penned *A Black Political Theology*.

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

I. THE PROBLEM

The problem is inherent in the need of family and church to be studied in regard to their symbolic and actual relationship. While W. E. B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frazier and Andrew Billingsley seem to have discovered the importance of studying the Black family and church, ministers and theologians have not been as perceptive. The problem is also argued by the fact that the Black family and church exist in a pluralistic society where the family is in deep trouble.

II. DEFINITIONS

Roberts defines the Black family as the extended family where there are diversities but also a common basis for togetherness and peoplehood.

Church is the Christian community related to God in Christ. The church is the ORGAN of the Spirit and an extension of the incarnation.

The church is also an institution of the believing community: a healing, socializing and humanizing agent, leaven, light and salt. In a word, the church is the Organ of spirit and agent of liberation. Organ equals its nature and agent defines its mission.

III. POINT OF VIEW

Roberts insists that there is no distinctive theology of the Black experience. Black, practicing theologians have the double task of "Keeping abreast of general theological development while at the same time do our own creative work." He still stands upon the position which he announced back in 1973. Black theology is a theology "in the making." A team effort is needed. Some scholars will be interested in Biblical theology, some in the historical or philosophical approaches, others will major in methodology and still others in content. Suffering, mission and the Black Messiah will be the concern of others.

The author contends that every writer must clarify the point of view from which he writes. He argues that it is unfortunate that most observers of Black theology consider James H. Cone's thought as the norm for all Black theology.

"African theology is not determined by John S. Mbiti; feminine theology is not identical with the writings of Rosemary

Ruether; neither is Latin American liberation theology the sole product of Gustavo Gutiérrez." Neither does Black theology find norm or finality in the views of James Cone in spite of the fact that he is to be honored for his pioneering work as a theologian of the Black experience.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the author of *Roots Of A Black Future* is taking the African roots in Black family and church seriously. He will use Euro-American and Third World theologies freely, but not uncritically. He holds that there is no greater value in Western sources of theologizing than in any other source. He also knows to avoid, as much as possible, male dominated language.

CHAPTER II "THE FAMILY IN THE BLACK EXPERIENCE"

I. THE BLACK FAMILY IN TROUBLE

Yes the Black family is in trouble, but the "pathology" of the Black family is not grounded in its matriarchy in a society which is predominately patriarchial as Daniel P. Moynihan concluded. Slavery is the real backdrop for single-parent, female-headed families. Thus, the extended family is a saving factor.

II. BLACK FAMILY IN HISTORY

In order to understand the Black family in a historical perspective it will be necessary to go back to its African beginnings.

III. SLAVERY AND THE BLACK FAMILY

Here Roberts points out that slavery in America was the most awful in all the world. And after Emancipation Blacks were free in this land but a landless people.

CHAPTER III. THE CHURCH IN THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Like the Black family, the Black religious experience also has its roots in Africa. He draws upon Henry H. Mitchell, John W. Blassingame and Gayraud Wilmore in support of his position that the Black religious experience has its roots in Africa.

Speaking of the origin and development of the Black Church until Emancipation he says, it was an invisible institution holding secret meetings even through the establishment of early visible Black church in Silver Bluff S.C., ca 1735. And Black religion as expressed in the Spirituals was neither all militancy or all quietism. He urges the readers to take a look at Black Theology before Emancipation. Protest and action were early marks of the black church's uniqueness.

CHAPTER IV. BLACK CHURCH AND FAMILY: RECONSTRUCTION I TO RECONSTRUCTION II

"Rebellion and protest as well as refuge and support have existed side by side throughout the history of the Black church in this country" says Roberts. The Black church and the Black families have been the main institutions which have kept our minds "stayed on freedom."

In this chapter, Roberts outlines the historical periods from invisibility through visibility. He discusses the historical periods in the Black experience and their impact upon the Black Church. He uses those periods outlined by Moyd in *Redemption in Black Theology* as acceptable. However, he suggests that the last period which Moyd referred to as the Period of Radical Reassertion 1955 to present (early 1870's is what was meant by Moyd), ought to be divided into 4 periods as follows:

1. 1955-1965 the Civil Rights/Integration Period
2. 1966-1972 Black Consciousness/Black Power
3. 1973-1977 Reformist Period

He equates this period with a kind of Booker T. Washington racial uplift and Puritan ethics: The Rev. Jessie Jackson and Operation PUSH was cited as an example.

4. 1978-Present (1980) Political Response to neo-Racism. The Supreme Court in Bakke case is an example.

It is now, half way through the book, that Roberts shifts from the basic historical discussion of the Black family and church and brings in his heavy theological artillery.

CHAPTER V. THE FAMILY OF GOD

The author now elaborates upon his position that the Black Church has been the extended family; this family has been the "domestic church" and at the center of this affirmation is the Biblical image of the church as the family of God.

While Black sociologists and historians have written about the Black Family and the Black Church what is missing, he says, is the theologian's contribution to point up their interdependence and mutual enrichment.

He shows at this point that the family of God has a biblical base in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Family of God is also the communion of saints and the communion of saints as the family of God arise out of or can also be traced to traditional African religious beliefs. The term *Ujamaa* (Swahili in Tanzania) means "familyhood." The African/Afro-American family is a reflection of this concept.

He is concerned that those who have written about Martin Luther King, Jr. and his "Beloved Community" did discuss the impact which Crozer and Boston Divinity Schools had on King. But they neglected or overlooked the influence which his family

the Black church and his Black teachers at Morehouse had upon him.

Harambee (unity) in Swahili means unity. The idea of "because I am, we are" in African thought has affinities in the Biblical view of the church. He brings in Paul's discussion of "Body of Christ" which means many members but one body. So the theological concept Family of God as understood in the Black community has both African linkage and a Biblical base.

CHAPTER VI. THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The family of God—the church—is also the people of God. This idea is tied to the Old Testament. God is superintendent of people both in Exodus and in Exile, in exile because of failures in Exodus through God's mercy.

The People of God in the Old Testament of which Black people have affinity were a people of repeated failures, betrayals, backsliding, and loss of faith. Israel was in crisis. The prophets announced God's judgment but likewise his mercy. Harriett Tubman a deliverer of her people was an example of the Black belief in peoplehood. People of God is also a New Testament idea which gave rise to faith and practice in the Black experience.

The author believes that several types of expressions indicate the way in which Black folks related their experiences of joy, sorrow and understanding of faith. Among the Lord's songs in a racist America are "Nobody knows the trouble I see." and "There is a Balm in Gilead".

The Household of God for Roberts, is that place where the community participates in a common tradition. He says the household of God refers to the inner cohesion of their community called the church. There is an interdependence of Family and Church in the Black Tradition. His Family of God in chapter 5 is his people of God in chapter 6. Familyhood is religious and secular, secular and religious, and is worthy of Biblical and theological discourse.

CHAPTER VII. THE BLACK MINISTRY: PRIESTLY AND PROPHETIC

The priestly ministry is for healing, comforting, and securing. The prophetic aspect of Black ministry involves social justice and social transformation, love and justice, liberating and reconciling.

The Black church needs a theology of ministry which will fill the gap left by which omission. Filling that gap has to do with self definition and ministry to Black people. It must provide a new understanding of the Christian faith. It must address the problem of Black suffering. All human beings suffer, he says,

but the victims of structural oppression bear the double burden of suffering.

The prophetic ministry to the Black family must review the social, political and economic factors for an oppressed community. The prophetic ministry must be concerned with Black motherhood, the Black man fathering, the Black child and family liberation.

While many white theologians are pre-occupied with the unborn and the dying, the priestly and prophetic ministry of the Black church and Black theologians must be concerned about the abundant life for black folk between life and death.

An Appraisal/Critique of Contents

1. Many of the themes and concepts are underdeveloped. For example: Family of God Communion of Saints, Ujamaa, Harambee, People of God, The Lord's Song in A Strange Land, Prophetic Ministry and Black church comforting the suffering are all concepts which await further development.
2. His use of the terms love and reconciliation still troubles me. He says, "the Prophetic Ministry involves social justice and its socially transforming aspects. The bridge between these is the relation between love and justice." (p. 110). His meaning of love needs clarification since love in Western theology has been corrupted. It is a concept which is articulated in religious circles but not practiced in human relationships. Reconciliation in white theology has also been corrupted meaning in some instances Black dropping their religious heritage etc. and became reconciled—cooped—into white thoughts and patterns. The reader could be enlightened by his definition of reconciliation.
3. The Biblio-theological prescriptions which is apparent in Chapters five and six is less evident in chapter seven.

Summary and Conclusions

1. The book is a scholarly production reflecting theological perception and maturity.
2. The book introduces many new themes and provides a springboard for further theological discussions.
3. The author breaks new ground rather than rediscussing previous themes. So, in keeping with his stated purpose he does not walk in the shadow of any other Black theologians (p. 14).
4. Within the weakness of the book lies its strength. While a plethora of themes were introduced and not fully developed in this volume, the book provides the theological base and stimulation to achieve the authors stated objective at the conclusion of his preface:

"It is hoped that [this book] will draw an increasing number of gifted black scholars, men and women, into a vital theological

dialogue for the sake of family and church.”

So in a word, if Black scholars are not stimulated Roberts will not lose his rewards.

BOOKLET DESIGNED BY
Toby Miller