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The Lord Will Make A Way Somehow: Black Worship and the Afro-American Story

The worship life of Afro-Americans is one of the most outstanding features of the Black church experience. Whether on Sunday morning or Wednesday evening, whether for a week-long revival or in preparation for protest and civil disobedience, worship in the Black church has been central to the Afro-American religious tradition. In fact, it has been argued that worship is the definitive activity of Afro-American religion, in that it is in "having church" that Black Christians name their world, and dramatically take their places in that world.[1]

This activity of naming the world and defining one's place in it, makes Afro-American worship the primary context-within which "meaning" is mediated in Afro-American religion. It is the ability of Black people to give meaning to life that has enabled them to creatively survive the absurdity of American racism. Current Black theological reflection assumes a "meaningful" context from which to construct a theology of liberation. William B. McClain notes:

> Much of the Black theology that has developed is reflected in the religious tradition and in the worship experience of Black people. For it has been the Black people's own understanding of God in the context of their own experience, i.e., the Black experience, in which they have groped for meaning, relevance, worth, assurance, reconciliation and their proper response to the God revealed. And this is what religion is all about. It is in this context that the Black worship experience was born.[2]

In this essay, we turn our attention to Black worship precisely because we are concerned with meaning in Afro-American religion. As worship mediates meaning through symbol and ritual, it enables Blacks to not only make sense of their life-world, but even critiques its absurdity in

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[1] Arthur Paris, *Black Pentecostalism: Southern Religion In An Urban World.* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), pp. 94-95.

[2] William B. McClain, *The Soul of Black Worship* (Madison, N.J.: The Multi-Ethnic Resource Center for Ministry, 1980), p. 1.

light of ultimate meaning. As such, Afro-American worship is worthy of study *beyond* the mere celebration of its value. It demands a critical analysis that describes both the functions of the worship experience, and the nature of the experience itself. This is the task, initially defined by Afro-American scholar *extraordinaire*, W. E. B. DuBois, in his study of Black folk religion in *The Souls of Black Folk*. It is only fitting that in an examination of a phenomenon whose public discourse is often prefaced by the paying of respect and homage to assembled dignitaries ("First giving honor to God, my pastor, pulpit associates, officers, members, and friends. . .,") that we begin with giving honor to DuBois:

> Three things characterized this religion of the slave, the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy. . . These were the characteristics of Negro religious life as developed up to the time of Emancipation. Since under the peculiar circumstances of the Black man's environment they were the one expression of his higher life, they are of deep interest to the student of his development, both socially and psychologically.[3]

While we must note that DuBois' categories are not exhaustive in characterizing the Black worship experience (in fact, the concept of "frenzy" stands as a reflection of the erudite scholar's own bias,) it is clear that DuBois believed that Afro-American worship was at the center of Black religion itself. He saw the analysis of meaning in Black worship as a central task in the study of the development of the Black community in general. This, combined with careful institutional analysis, was the agenda DuBois set for social scientists interested in Afro-American religion.[4]

The worship life considered in this essay is drawn from several church contexts, in an attempt to discern common themes in Afro-American worship that transcend denominational, social, and economic differences.[5] Although these distinctions seem to have some bearing on various aspects of Black religious life, there does appear to be a common Black culture, a communal religious identity that is expressed in the worship life of different Black churches. This is at the center of the meaning which is mediated in Afro-American worship.

In worship, we are presented with an Afro-American religious world view, articulated through testimony, prayer, song, and sermon. The facts of Black life are rehearsed in the worship service, communicating to the community the primary realities of the social group. These realities are as specific as the worshiping community's appraisal of the week's current

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[3] W. E. B. DuBois *The Soul of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett, 1961), pp. 141-142.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 142.

[5] The data for this essay was gathered primarily in four church contexts: 1) Inner city Baptist; 2) Suburban Methodist; 3) Rural Pentecostal and 4) The preaching ministry of an area pastor who conducts regular revivals and has two widely heard weekly radio broadcasts.

events, and their discernment of God's involvement in, purpose for, and judgment upon those events. Simultaneously, when considered both as points on an Afro-American historical continuum, and also as manifestations of a common experience of Black people in American society, one can typologize these realities and bring them together in three basic categories, or basic realities of the Afro-American religious world view that are part and parcel of worship in the Black church tradition. They are: (1) the reality of the everyday life-world, a reality that is problematic, and characterized by what we shall call "trouble;" (2) the reality of the humanity of Black people, a radical affirmation of Black personhood in the midst of a racist society and (3) the reality of the Providence and Parenthood of God.[6] We will consider each concept separately, looking first at its manifestation in the public discourse of Black worship, and then its rehearsal in the ritual behavior of the worship service. We shall then look at how these come together in worship to tell the "story" of Black life, communicating the basic theme and meaning of Afro-American being in the world.

The Everyday Life-World — Trouble

The everyday life-world of the Black community is the point of departure for the analysis of Afro-American worship because it is also the starting point for the structure of Black ritual itself. In the Black worship service the congregation assembles with all of the "cares and woes" of the everyday life-world.[7] They enter worship fully conscious of their need to process these life concerns. The service moves from this "introit," often ritualized in the testimony or devotional service, to the climax where in the ecstasy of the preaching event the goodness of God is reaffirmed. In short, one comes to "take your burdens to the Lord and leave them there," and leaves reassured that "I'm a child of the King."

The everyday life-world of Blacks is characterized by the experience of "trouble," which has its theological counterpart in what James Cone calls suffering.[8] Trouble is to be experienced as a matter of course, and is a fundamental characterization of the way in which the larger social sys-

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[6] Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 10. This is akin to what Paris calls "The Black Christian Tradition," consisting of the Parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples, a non-sexist rendering of the A.M.E. Church's motto: "God our Father, Christ our Redeemer, Man our Brother." We would argue that the establishment of 'black humanity' has historically superseded, by virtue of survival needs, the preservation of sanity and outright necessity, the idea of the kinship of all peoples.

[7] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Black Church as a Therapeutic Community," *The Journal of The Interdenominational Theological Center*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 1980, p. 29ff.

[8] This point is most forcefully made in his *God of The Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

tem presents itself to the individual. Life is portrayed as plagued with disappointments and difficulties, "trials and tribulations." Family problems, trouble on the job, the insensitivities of government and industry to the plight of people of color, are all presented as elements of a larger complex of forces that act against the believer. In his book *God in the Ghetto*, Dr. William A. Jones, Pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Brooklyn, describes this phenomenon:

> When the alienated and afflicted speak of "The System," the connotations are clear; they have engaged in serious scrutiny as a result of their own pain predicament, and have concluded that their victimization is neither an accident of creation nor of history, but rather the result of a skillfully designed pattern of system exclusion from the mainstream of American culture.[9]

As a pastor and preacher, Jones communicates this same reality to his congregation. Their affirmative response to his articulation of real trouble indicates their shared perception of the everyday life-world.

> Don't worry about tomorrow, tomorrow will worry about itself.
> Each day has enough trouble of its own.
> [Congregation responds assuredly.] You sound like you know something about that
> [Great response.] Each day has enough trouble of its own [Response.]
> Each day—enough trouble!
> How real! How true! How honest!
> Each day—enough trouble!
> Headache! Heartache! Heartbreak!
> Each day—enough trouble!
> Concern for one's children, impersonal systems, economic injustice, exorbitant energy costs!
> Each day—enough trouble!
> Arrogant bureaucrats, deaf ears, spiritual wickedness in high places, satanic assaults!
> Each day—enough trouble!
> Foul air, polluted streams, acid rain, nuclear insanity!
> Each day—enough trouble!
> Muggers, rapists, robbers, murderers, crime in the streets and in the suites!
> Each day—enough trouble!
> Tyrannical rulers, wanton hypocrisy, degenerate democracy, hell on the loose, death in the pot!
> Each day—enough trouble!
> Each day has enough trouble of its own.[10]

Sometimes the preacher communicates the reality of trouble in the formal sermonic testimony. Reverend Fred La Garde uses this method:

> I know that I'm gonna have some downs in life.
> I know that I'm gonna have some ups.
> For Jesus said "In this world, you're gonna have some trials and tribulations."

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[9] William A. Jones, *God in The Ghetto* (Elgin, Ill.:

[10] Jones, "No Tomorrow, Today," Sermon, Feb. 1985, The Bethany Baptist Church, Brooklyn, New York.

> But he also said "I've come that you might have life and that more abundantly."
> I've come up through hard trials and disappointments.
> But my robe's gonna be washed white. . .
> Into each life some rain must fall.

Life in the world is presented as problematic—being in the world is portrayed as fraught with obstacles to human fulfillment. The popular song expresses it well: "Trouble in my way, I got to cry sometimes. Lay awake at night, that's alright, Jesus will fix if after a while." Though Jesus is presented as the solution, thereby engendering hope in the worshiper, He is presented as "answer" in contrast to the inevitability of trouble. Similarly, such key phrases as "I'm goin' up the rough side of the mountain" and "We've borne our burdens in the heat of the day," and such popular hymns as "We'll Understand it Better By and By" and "Beams of Heaven as I go" point to the precarious nature of being in this society.[12]

In the testimonies of the worshiper, there is also the articulation of trouble. Testimonies most often heard during the devotional service which immediately precedes morning worship, are filled with personal accounts of the difficulties of the everyday life-world. In the opening lines, the worshiper usually offers words of greeting to fellow worshipers and celebration of the goodness of God, while closing lines often entreat the prayers of the congregation and offer exhortation to fellow believers who also have "trials and tribulations." Between these opening and closing statements, however, one hears the specific nature of the individual's trouble:

> I thank God today, because the other night, I was at school, so keep praying for me 'cause I am trying to make it at school. The devil is so busy trying to get me into the same things those other kids are into, but I'm going to keep holding on . . . .[13]

However, it is not just in the text of testimony, song, and sermon that meaning is mediated in Afro-American religion. There are also ritual behaviors that symbolize the facts of the Afro-American world view. The pains and struggles of the everyday life-world are acted out in dramatic fashion in Afro-American worship. Black worshipers express the reality of trouble in several ways.

Tears are not an uncommon expression of trouble in the Black church. Sometimes they are tears of joy, but often they are tears of sorrow.

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[12] These hymns were written and composed by ex-slave Charles Albert Tindley. A Methodist pastor, Tindley based many of his texts on the experience of Blacks and the oral tradition of recent migrants from the South to his church. The idea of trouble is common to many of his hymns. See the excellent biography by Ralph H. Jones, *Charles A. Tindley: The Prince of Preachers* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).

[13] Testimony delivered at Faith Tabernacle Pentecostal Church, Port Norris, New Jersey, October 1984.

Through tears, the worshiper brings her/his sorrow into the church for processing. They are part of the larger phenomenon of testimony, that makes it not just fair game but expected behavior to acknowledge trouble as real in the context of worship. Everyday life experience must be interpreted in light of the God of Providence. "Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there."

The performance practices of singers and preachers also ritualizes the reality of trouble. Through facial expressions and body contortions, referred to by some as "gettin ugly for the Lord," the performer comes to act out the expressiveness of life and the contortions of everyday experience. Some songs and some sermons cannot be performed unless one has "gone through," for it is only then that one can model the paid of life in religious performance. And if you have not had to go through, the church mother will tell you, "Just keep on livin'."

The Affirmation of Black Humanity

We have referred to this second concept as Black humanity, the affirmation of the personhood of the Black community. This is a radical affirmation for Black fold whose humanity has been at best the subject of debate, and at worst vehemently denied by the culture at large. Yet the Afro-American religious world view has been constant in its declaration of the reality of Black people as people, fully human, created in the image of God. As such, this humanity, is both a fact of the Afro-American reilgious world view, and simultaneously it is grounded in its primordial category—the reality of God. Black personhood, then, assumes a qualitative relationship with God, giving dignity and worth to Black being; but this being cannot be understood in the categories of individuated consciousness that characterize western definitions of human being. Instead, the self is understood as a corporate entity. Therefore, there is dignity and worth ascribed to all within the community of faith. This s traceable to the influence of West African traditions. In these traditions, self identification is made in terms of the social group, rather than the individual. The sense of self was "by philosophical definition the 'we' instead of the 'I' and to be human was to belong to the collectivity—the community.[14] When the collective sense of self is brought through the harshness of the slave experience, it, too, undergoes modification. Whereas, the collective consciousness of Africans had been understood in terms of tribe, it now found expression in one of two ways, each operative in a given community at the same time, i.e., race as collective self, and local church as primary social group collectivity. In other words, Blacks came to identify

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[14] Wade Nobles, "African Philosophy: Foundations for Black Psychology" in Reginald Jones, ed., *Black Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972, p. 29. See aosl p. 19.

themselves, and locate the center of their humanity in terms of the Black race in general, and their Black churches in particular.[15] We would argue, that whild many have endeavored to explain the egalitarian nature of Black Christianity in terms of Martin Luther King's vision for a new nonracist community and society,[16] a strong allegiance to race and race concerns has emanated from this collective sense of self, this "we-consciousness," and that has been fundamental in the development of the Afro-American religious worldview:

> Can't nobody sing, like we can sing.
> Can't nobody shout like we can shout.
> Can't nobody pray like we can pray.
> Can't nobody preach like we can preach.[17]

This same race pride and unity is also reinforced through the constant citations of the collective experience of oppression and liberation from slavery. Constant references to "our foreparents' toiling in the heat of an Alabama sun," "my grandmother's prayers after a long day's work for white folds," and "our fathers and mothers snatched from the shores of Africa" combine with notations from Northern/urban pulpits about "down South" and "back home" to communicate this corporate sense of self. Those parents are "our" parents, those places were "our" homes. The heroes were "our" heroes:

> Pauls and Silas, locked in jail,
> None to go their bail.
> But though they were in the jail,
> They didn't let the jail get in them.

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[15] Harold Dean Trulear, "An Analysis of the Formative Roles of Ideational and Social Structures in the Development of Afro-American Religion" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Drew University, 1983), pp. 257-262. C. Eric Lincoln, in his *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken, 1975) makes this point regarding local church identity: "Because of the peculiar nature of the Black experience and the centrality of institutionalized religion in the development of that experience, the time was when the personal dignity of the Black individual was communicated almost entirely through his church affiliation. . . . To be able to say, 'I belong to Mt. Nebo Baptist" or "We go to Mason's Chapel Methodist' was the accepted way of establishing identity and status when there were few other criteria by means of which a sense of self or a communication of place could be projected," (pp. 115-116). Howard Thurman, in his book, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, goes so far as to argue that slaves affirmed their humanity in their exclusion of slavemasters from "the pale of moral and ethical responsibility" (p. 121). In our terms, the slavemaster was non-human.

[16] Peter Paris, *Social Teachings*, p. 10. Ironically, it is to King's legacy that we turn to find an excellent example of the idea of the primacy of the corporate Black self in Black religion. See the treatment of the sin of Rev. Fields against the Black community in King's *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 133-37.

[17] Frederick H. LaGarde makes these remarks at a Martin Luther King Memorial Service, Community Baptist Church of Love, Paterson, N.J., January 1985.

They were like my foreparents.
They were in slavery.
But slavery wasn't in them.
They could look at their naked feet.
And turn one to another and sing:
'I got shoes,
You got shoes
All God's children got shoes.
When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes.
Gonna walk all over God's heaven.'[18]

The Black heroes of faith serve as locators for personal identity, for all worshipers share in it. Interestingly, even the Spiritual cited in the above sermon extract shows the corporate identity in linking the "I" with the "You," and declaring that "All God's children got shoes," thereby constructing an identity of worth (shoes were a sign of social status to barefoot slaves) rooted in the reality of God.

The matter of the common "place" of ancestry, the "our-ness" of back home is seen in this sermon reference in a middle-class Black northern church:

> A great mnay of us—you here this morning—remember the time when where you went to the bathroom, where you sat on the bus, where you ate in the restaurant, and the door which you entered through was guided by a sign; and that sign restricted what you could do and where you could go. Those signs were posted. Well they took the signs down, but figuratively speaking, they are still in existence.[19]

Here the preacher calls the minds of his congregation to a common ground of experience/location, and then reinforces its reality by positing its perpetuation. In other words, he warns his suburban congregation of the importance of the we-ness with respect to Black personhood, as affirmed in contemporary experience.

Finally, as stated earlier, the "we-ness" of Black personhood can be expressed on the congregational, or even denominational level. During the invitation to church membership at one Pentecostal church (a separate event from the invitation to Christian discipleship, it must be noted,) the congregation sings:

This is the church of Mount Sinai
This is the church of Mount Sinai
Oh you can't join it,
You've got to be born in
This is the church of Mount Sinai.[20]

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[18] LaGarde, "Praising God," Sermon, March 1985. Calvary Baptist Church, Paterson, New Jersey.

[19] Ernest Lyght, "The Gospel: No Restricted Signs," Sermon, September 1984, St. Mark's United Methodist Church, Montclair, New Jersey.

[20] "Song of Mt. Sinai," recorded at Faith Tabernacle Pentecostal Church, Port Norris, New Jersey, October 1984.

Indeed, to a large extent, Black personal identity and worth came to be centered in one's church membership, so that the corporate identity could equally be expressed in terms of church affiliation, as well as race.[21]

The concept of Black humanity is dramatically affirmed in the ritual behavior of Afro-American worship. Through ritual discourse and structure, the corporate Black self is released especially in the recapitulation of the worth of others. Consider first the use of the titles "Brother" and "Sister" in addressing church members. In a world where derogatory titles were the order of the day for Black folk, they could turn to the religious arena where their humanity was NOT in question, but where they could be addressed with dignity as "brother" and "sister." This also affirms the egalitarian nature of Black humanity, for everybody is brother and sister in the church. The pastor is "Brother Pastor," the deacon is "Brother Deacon" the Sunday School Teacher is "Sister Teacher," the steward is "Sister Steward," etc. These are powerful forms of public address that are part of Black ritual, affirming one's right to be human and recognized as such. The same point can be made about forms of address for officers of the church, those who on the outside are the world's nobodies, but on the inside are trustees, auxiliary presidents and missionaries.[22]

Radical Black humanity is reflected in Afro-American ritual in gestures of politeness and respect. There is a protocol that characterizes Black worship that assumes the worth of those in attendance. One quite noticeable gesture if the holding of one's right index finger in the air as one excuses oneself in the midst of the service. Often, this is done with the body posture in a slightly hunched position, as the worshiper slips out. The congregation acknowledges the legitimacy of the action in excusing the worshiper. One also sees protocol during the time when people enter to worship, study or meet in the church. One must shake hands with the folk, hug the people, or through some intimate gesture give physical assent to their humanity in worship.[23] This is also part of the ritual of the devotional service before the "regular service" at 11 o'clock. When one comes forward to pray, one shakes hands with the devotion leaders, recognizing their authority and humanity, and then proceeds to "praying ground," usually a chair to the left or right of the communion table. A final gesture we mention in passing is the raising of the hand,

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[21] Lincoln, *Black Church*, pp. 115-116.

[22] James Cone, "Sanctification and Liberation in the Black Religious Tradition," in Theodore Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981).

[23] In one prayer meeting attended by the author, two hours into the service, the man sitting in the next seat nudged him and said in a hurt voice, "You didn't shake my hand." The author had not recognized his personhood.

usually found in one of two contexts, (1) to witness to the truth communicated and affirm the communicator, whether singer or preacher, and (2) when the congregation is asked to stand, and one cannot, usually because one is holding a baby or is in some way infirmed.

Particularly powerful is the way in which ritual structure is flexible enough to include announcements and testimonies from members not originally included in the order of worship. A worshiper, moved to testify during a part of the service where testimony is not called for, often after a song or the sermon is permitted to speak, without censure, and often with affirmation. The congregation respects the person and their right to speak above the "form and fashion" of a printed order of worship.

Pageantry also ritualizes Black humanity. The use of uniform or wardrobe for choirs and ushers, nurses units and missionaries, is an important demonstration of the new definition of humanity. The tribalism of local churches is reflected in the distinctive uniforms and/or robes worn by different churches, made more noticeable when different churches fellowship together. Even within a given church, several choirs will have different robes, declaring who they are. Although the practice of costuming choirs has come under heavy fire, it must at least be recognized that the robe does make, at root, a statement declaring one's right to be human. The "Grand March" of choirs in procession or recession, and the congregation during the offering is a similar pageantry behavior, that bids all participate in the splendor of new humanity.

One must also relate the call and response pattern of Black worship to this new humanity. Whether the pattern is found in music or the preaching event, it signals a right on the part of the general congregation to approve or disapprove of what is said or sung. This is not an attitude of arrogance, but a recognition of community norms and values. This points back to the concept of governing council and corporate sense of self in West African traditions. We see the governing council concept operative because the most vocal people in the call and response pattern of worship tend to be people in leadership roles in the church. The corporate sense of self is operative because the congregation, in responding to preaching and singing, in effect are co-creators of the song or sermon in their dialogue with the performer.

In relatively quietistic Black middle class services, there is another dimension of Black personhood to be considered. Constantly under fire for "not being Black" in their worship styles, these churches are still in many ways operating with the categories we have articulated as seminal elements of the Afro-American religious worldview. In the context of radical Black humanity, the quietism of the service itself can be seen as ethos in action, ritualizing their humanity. It it is true that these communities have assimilated many of the cultural values of the dominant culture, then their definition of what it means to be human may have

taken on similar modification. Nonetheless, it is that concept of humanity that characterizes their worship style. If being human means to be dignified and intellectual, under control and logical, all patterns of behavior that this society has said Blacks are incapable of, then these congregations will model these ideas of human virtue in the context of worship.[24] This is still a function of Black humanity. Those who would deny this as in some sense legitimate would have to eliminate people such as DuBois and Daniel Payne from the Black religious world.

Last, but not least, there is in the act of religious exstasy an acknowledgement of Black humanity. First, the assumption is that religious ecstatic behavior is acceptable before the brothers and sisters, an affirmation of the interconnectedness of the worshipers. Outsiders can hamper ecstasy because of their "intrusion" upon the intimacy of the congregational family at worship. During the filming of the worship service at her church, Bishop Rugh Satchell exhorted her congregation:

> I know things are a little different around here today, but let's get into the service. I can tell you one thing—this camera don't take my salvation.[25]

Most importantly, however, someone does "get happy," she/he moves to the most *human* state of all, when the Spirit has taken control, and the worshiper, now experiencing her/himself as free of the fetters of the everyday life-world, acts out that freedom in religious ecstasy. When the worshiper moves to this state, she/he is attended to by the community, either in the creation of space for the acting out of their humanity (moving self or furniture, removing glasses, etc.) or through verbal encouragement, or through forming a circle around the "shouter." The worshiper experiences the fullness of humanity, then, in the freedom of worship, the support and space provided by the congregation at worship, and finally, by reaching an experience of "union" with the One to whom worship is directed.

The Providence and Parenthood of God

Not only is the worship event directed to God, but the ritual builds in dramatic fashion to the place where God is most fully revealed and experienced. This is the place where the reality of the Providence and

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[24] In an interview, one long-standing member of a middle class congregation expressed considerable lament over the advent of gospel music in their worship services. A particular source of irritation for her was the swaying of the choir and hand clapping of the congregation. "I like to dance, but don't bring it into the church," she said. Her feeling was that dancing was for dance hall or social club, and that church worship should be quiet and dignified.

[25] Remarks recorded at Faith Tabernacle Pentecostal Church, Port Norris, New Jersey, September 1984.

Parenthood of God is most clearly articulated. We consider this element of the Afro-American religious worldview last not because the Black God concept is a mere social construct of human consciousness, but because its most intense moment of realization comes toward the end of the service, as the preacher and congregation move toward the climax of worship. While some would argue that the reality of trouble/suffering has moved Black Christians to portray God in such terms in order to facilitate survival and hope in the Black community, it is our contention that these realities only service, at best, to modify the Black God concept imported from West African Religious and philosophical systems.[26] However, Black faith in a Provident God traces its roots to indigenous African religious traditions, not the despair of early American slavery.[27]

Though Albert Raboteau rightly argues for the death of the African gods, he further insists on the retention of modes of perception of the religious reality, which would include ideas concerning the spirit realm. While it is true that the High Gods of West African religions were not perceived to have a strong role in the current affairs of the community, the pervasive spirituality of the West African worldviews transported to America invested the Christian God with the providential, parenting and caring functions once reserved for the "lesser spirits" of the old world cultures. The theme of the Providence and Parenthood of God continues in some form up to the present time, and is communicated regularly in the Black worship experience. Worshipers encourage one another in song to "Be not dismayed whate'er betides, God will take care of you." In the preaching event the preacher calls to mind the many facets of God's care:

> He's a Hear Fixer
> —Mind Regulator
> —Burden Bearer
> He's—E-vuh-reee—thing to me.[28]

This example, as the one below, could be taken from any number of Black sermons. So oft are these lines recited, that one could call them "Black litany." However, one chooses to label them, it is clear that their constant recitation in Afro-American worship services serves to reinforce the reality of the Providence and Parenthood of God. We would argue

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[26] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford Press, 1973) is the definitive treatment of the issue of African retentions in Afro-American religion. See also Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwich Press, 1979) for a helpful consideration of African retentions from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge.

[27] Eddie S. O'Neal, "The Black Church's Future," a lecture presented at Bethany Baptist Church, Newark, New Jersey, June 1983.

[28] LaGarde, The Cross of Christ."

that this reinforcement not only affirms the fact that God is the Provider and Parent, but also that God's care is the primordial reality of Afro-American religious consciousness. This litany is usually found at the climax of the preaching event, the time when the "Spirit is at its highest," and worshipers make their primary contact with the reality of God. It is celebration at its best moment, and celebration can only occur with the information mediated therein is understood as having a reality that is "taken for granted." Consider this example from William A. Jones, Jr.:

He's my Rock, my Sword, my Shield,
He's my Wheel in the Middle of a Wheel.
He's my Lily of the Valley, He's the Bright and Morning Star.
—Friend of the friendless
—Hope for the hopeless
—Health for the sick
—Food for the hungry
—Water for the thirsty
—Prophet without a peer
—Priest without an equal
—King of Kings, Lord of Lords
—Chief Rabbi, Sovereign Ruler
—Potentate of the Universe
YEEES—YEEEES—YEEEES
—Dyingbed Maker
—Host at the coronation
YEEEES, LORD[29]

This moment of intensity in Black worship, not only ritualizes the primordial reality of God, but also becomes the point of departure for the community to identify itself in light of its relationship *to* the primordial reality (Jones says He's *MY* rock). The worshipers make vicarious identification with the preacher at this point and see God as *THEIR* Rock, Sword, Shield, etc. In so doing, they lay claim to their fundamental identity as "children of God," which is also the basis of their Black humanity.

This moment in worship, as previously stated, is accompanied by great religious ecstasy, what DuBois had called "frenzy." The ritual behaviors which attend this moment, "dancing," "shouting," "moaning," "tongues," etc. are all ways in which church folk meaningfully demonstrate their dependence upon God as Parent and Provider. In ecstasy, there is a "letting go" that implies trust. The worshiper trusts that "Greater Power" to have full sway in the moment of ecstasy. One must "Let the Spirit have its way!" While the "shouting" in Black church services can be called emotional catharsis, it can only be cathartic because the one "getting happy" is willing to yield to the "Power of God."

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[29] William A. Jones, "From The Bottom Up," sermon, March 1984.

Songs such as "I Must Tell Jesus" and "He Touched Me" elicit qualitative emotional response that is dependent upon a taken-for-granted relationship with a benevolent God. The celebrative closing moments of the sermon event, or to use the vernacular—the "gravy"—often move the congregation to ecstasy in telling the story of the goodness of God, His care and provision,[30] which would not be points for celebration if not a part of the worldview taken for granted.

A second set of ritual behaviors that shows the God concept of the Afro-American religious worldview is the treatment of the role of Pastor in the context of worship. The preacher is "God's man," and increasingly "God's woman," set forth to "break the bread of life." As such, much of the sacred aura and awesomeness that is part of the nature of God, God's "holiness," comes to be seen to reside in the pastor. During the sermon event, this becomes most pronounced, for in this context the preacher is expected to speak for God. The preacher must establish in the early parts of the sermon, or even before he/she begins to preach that what is to be said is "what thus saith the Lord." The preacher then becomes a symbol of God, in the context of the sermon event. The use of robes, capes, etc., to enhance the preacher's appearance and the attendant nurse with her ever-present orange juice and fresh handkerchiefs are all part of the props or staging of the ritual drama where "God speaks to His children." When the pastor lives up to the high expectations of his/her congregation (and because of the God-aura surrounding the office, these are high expectations) one can note the treatment of the pastor in the context of worship (and sometimes beyond) to see how the congregation feels its dependence on God as Parent. The preacher is a sort of "under-parent."[31]

As "under-parent" the preacher is charged with the task of story-telling. The sermon itself is a story, recounting the events of everyday life world, whether historical or contemporary, and pointing to the need for continued walking in the power of God and radical Black humanity. As a parent tells her/his child a bedtime story, thereby reaffirming the child's view of the world and relationship with the parent, so too does the "underparent" tell the congregation its bedtime story, ostensibly not to put them to sleep, but rather to awaken them to and reaffirm them in their view of the world and relationship with God the Parent. This story-telling function of the preacher is not insignificant, for "telling the story" becomes the paradigm for the worship event itself, and in that the worship event is the place of mediated meaning for Black folk, "the story" is the form and place of central meaning for the Afro-American religious

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[30] *Ibid.*

[31] This relationship has been abused by some pastors, yet its existence must be recognized as a reality.

worldview.

Worship and The Afro-American Story

In the dramatic progression from the reality of trouble in the everyday life-world, to the radical affirmation of Black humanity and the Providence and Parenthood of God, the Afro-American story is presented in ritual form. A story is a chain of events given significance in the context of reflection. The one(s) for whom the story has meaning recount the events of their past and provide a narrative for them, at once linking them into some coherent framework, and also gleaning from them a sense of what it means to be in the world in the contemporary setting. The story does this by positing life as a "struggle," that "stirs the deepest primitive emotion of our souls."[32] The Afro-American story is the recounting of the Black struggle to be and become, in the face of white racism. The radical humanity of Black folk was asserted in their worldview, but it had to be lived out in their daily lives. The rehearsing of these incidents and events that came to have seminal significance in the Black life are what cause us to see Black worship as "story."

The Afro-American religious story is directional. In linking past events with the current situation, Black Christians affirmed history as story, their daily lives as part of the ongoing story, and God as the God of history/story. The God of their worldview who was the ground of being, was intricately involved in the events of past days, and continues in the present day situation as a "Bridge over troubled Waters." God's salvation is portrayed in terms of train, ship and chariot, all vehicles that are going somewhere, moving toward heaven. By heaven, we mean not only a place in the afterlife where there was relief from suffering, but more importantly, the reality which heaven came to symbolize, i.e., the full actualization of the Black communal self in everyday life. Heaven in this wise, can either be the afterlife, the North/Canada, Africa, or Martin Luther King's land of freedom, depending on the historical context.

Conceptualizing the Black story in terms of direction does not, however, mean that it is plagued by the linear rigidity and teleology of western philosophy of history.[33] Rather there is a flexibility in the Black story that is a key discernible element. The story is not so much dogmatic as

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[32] Michael Novak, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 53.

[33] Robert Nisbet strongly critiques this philosophy of history in *Social Change and History* (New York: Oxford Press, 1969). Its implications for the sociological study of Afro-Americans is the central issue in Stanford Lyman's *The Black American in Sociological Thought: A Failure in Perspective* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972). Also, see my "A Critique of Functionalism: Toward a More Holistic Sociology of Afro-American Reilgion" in *Journal of Religious Thought*, 42:1 (Spring-Summer, 1985).

thematic, not so much proposition as framework.[34] The story communicates the truth of Black life, but not so much as an argument; the story is rather a picture, sweeping across time, giving meaning to events. Carl Ellis likens this theme to the theme of a jazz composition, where the emphasis is not so much on reproducing the score of the composer, as being faithful to the theme, while using improvisation to join the soul of the musician/worshiper to the theme of the composer.[35] The theme of the Black story, says James Cone, is liberation,[36] or to use terms from the Afro-American religious world view: *The activity of God the Parent/Provider, on behalf of His radically human children to deliver them from trouble.*

The story gets its substance from events: events of liberation that give experiential assent to the reality of the Parent/Provider God and God's activity on behalf of His people. These events, and the reality they celebrate are acted out in the ritual of Black worship. The elements of the Afro-American religious world view have their parallel in the ritual behaviors of Black worship. Together, they tell the story of God as Liberator in ritual drama—a drama that communicates the truth of the worldview, but also uses the mode of story that makes the worldview emotionally satisfying by relating the personal story of the worshiper to the community's story.

With story as the definitive form of the Afro-American religious world view, it should not surprise us that the three elements of that world view under discussion are not unrelated. Rather, they are interwoven and overlapping—inextricably joined together. One cannot genuinely talk about the Providence of God without recognizing the reality of trouble in everyday life. The line from the gospel song says, "If it had not been for the Lord on my side, tell me, where would I be?" The Parenthood of God implies the humanity of the children of God, imbuing them with divine worth and significance. The worshiper contrasts the trouble of this world with her/his real status in the sight of the heavenly Parent when exclaiming, "I've been called *everything* but a child of God!"

Perhaps their interconnectedness is best seen in the sermon closing, that part of the service where meaning is most intense in Afro-American worship. The sermon "gravy" is the celebration of victory over trouble. In this moment the drama is brought to a celebrative climax tht lifts Black worshipers beyond trouble in one of several seemingly standard styles.

The first is the rehearsal of the crucifixion—resurrection story of the

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[34] Novak, *ibid.*, pp. 65-68.

[35] Carl Ellis, *Beyond Liberation: The Gospel and The Black Experience in America* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1983), pp. 156-164.

[36] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 54.

Christian faith. The suffering of Jesus is recounted; the whippings, mockings, and actual crucifixion are portrayed in graphic terms. The audience, aware of its own trouble, becomes vicariously involved in the suffering of Jesus. Finally, He is killed. It looks like it's all over:

> But early
> Sunday morning,
> While the dew
> Was still on the roses
> JESUS
> My Saviour
> JESUS
> My Redeemer
> JESUS
> My all in all
> Got up from the grave declaring
> "All power in Heaven and earth is in my hand"

This traditional rendering of the crucifixion-resurrection story hooks up with the worshiper's story, and the worshiper vicariously gets up with all power, too. This is worth shouting about, and many of the congregation are on their feet in vicarious ritualized resurrection.

A second standard sermon closing is the testimony on the part of the preacher.[37] The reality of trouble is affirmed in his account of how she/he overcame them with the help of the Lord. The congregation witnesses/responds, acknowledging its own coming through. Finally, there is the picture of heaven and final rest as sermon closing. This acknowledges the reality of this worldly trouble in that it portrays heaven as a place where "the wicked will cease from troublin' and the weary will be at rest." But heaven is where "God will wipe every tear from our eyes." The worshipers are carried to heaven themselves and "walk the streets of gold" where "it's always 'Howdy Howdy.' " While the preacher takes the congregation on the "tour of heaven," she/he will be sure to see Jesus/God Himself, the Parent and Provider, for "when I see Jesus, everything will be alright!"

We recognize that the above analysis presents Afro-American worship in a relatively ideal form. Similarly, it is clear that both variations and abuses of the tradition exist. Yet, we find ritual and worship in the Black church still to be the primary context for the mediation of meaning for the Afro-American religious worldview and the theme of the Afro-American story. The constituent elements of that worldview—the reality of trouble on the everyday life-world, the radical affirmation of the humanity of Black people, and the God concept of Providence and Parenthood—are at once part of a moving drama from trouble to victory

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[37] See LaGarde, "The Cross of Christ," sermon.

and simultaneously brought together to signal the theme of the Afro-American story: The activity of God the Parent/Provider, on behalf of his radically human children to deliver them from trouble.