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RESISTANCE, REBELLION, AND REFORM: THE COLLEGIATE GOSPEL CHOIR MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

Scholarly Illumination

Several scholars have illuminated aspects of the Sanctified Church worship tradition which represent movement toward social rebellion, cultural resistance, and ecclesial reform. Historian David Daniels contends that the worship practices developed under the leadership of C.P. Jones and C.H. Mason fostered the renewal of African-American Christianity through a restructuring of slave religion. In alliance with other "progressive" Black Churches, the holiness movement advocated moral, ecclesial, liturgical, and pastoral reforms.¹ Sociologist Cheryl Gilkes portrays the Sanctified Church as a cultural-resistance movement whose liturgies and structures enabled black women to resist the racial and cultural assaults they experienced in the U.S. during the period between 1895 and World War II, the era of Jim Crow:

Women in the Sanctified Church were committed to the cause of racial uplift. They retained their commitment to ecstatic worship, which black Baptists and

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¹David Douglas Daniels III, "The Cultural Renewal of Slave Religion: Charles Price Jones and the Emergence of the Holiness Movement in Mississippi," (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1992), 276.

Methodists were rejecting. They also retained an emphasis on women's interests, education, professionalism, and the cultivation of a black female image that contradicted the dominant culture's stereotypes.²

Gilkes concludes that black women in the Sanctified Church have maintained a dialectical tradition of protest and cooperation, driven on the one hand by their struggle against structures and patterns of subordination based on sex, and on the other hand by their determination to maintain unity with black men in the face of racism and discrimination.³ Although her primary focus is the description of women's traditions in these churches, Gilkes's ultimate purpose is to discern and delineate models of cooperative and egalitarian male-female leadership within the Sanctified churches.

Walter Hollenweger calls attention to the emergence of a distinctive new unity between "prayer and politics, social action and song" in the black Pentecostal churches:

In addition to the charisms which are known in the history of Pentecostalism, such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, religious dancing, prayer for the sick, they practice the gift of demonstrating, organizing, and publicizing as another kind of prophecy. I have known black Pentecostal churches in which these activities were explicitly mentioned in a list of gifts of the Spirit, but not as it is usually done in many political church groups in Europe where political analysis replaces prayer and song (not to speak of dancing and speaking in tongues).⁴

²Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "Together and in Harness": Women's Traditions in the Sanctified Church," *Signs* 10 (Summer 1985): 693.

³Ibid., 697.

⁴Walter J. Hollenweger, "Pentecostalism and Black Power," *Theology Today* XXX (October 1973): 230.

Black Power

The relationship between Pentecostalism and Black Power has also been explored by Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine in *People, Power, Change: Movements of Social Transformation*. They conclude that both Pentecostalism and Black Power can be identified as parts of a cultural revolution.⁵ James Tinney's doctoral dissertation compares black political and religious movements, giving special attention to the political overtones and implications of Pentecostal beliefs. He discerns among black Pentecostals a "total obsession with power forms of one kind or another." Moreover, a *modus operandi* of change by revolutionary or even violent means is latent within their doctrine of expropriation of spiritual power."⁶

This impetus toward ecclesial reform, cultural resistance, and revolution or rebellion growing out of the Sanctified Church tradition is further illustrated by organized black initiatives undertaken in response to the experience of alienation in the broader context of higher education—the collegiate gospel choir movement.

Collegiate Gospel Choir Movement

Generally speaking, gospel music is a key factor that attracts young people to Black churches. Notwithstanding their negative characterization of some of these young people as "gospel music groupies" and "part-time college-aged church goers," sociologists C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence

⁵Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia H. Hine, *People, Power, Change: Movements of Social Transformation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, [1970]), 204.

⁶James S. Tinney, "A Theoretical and Historical Comparison of Black Political and Religious Movements," (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1978), 289.

Mamiya acknowledge the cultural significance of the collegiate gospel choirs: gospel music has found a place beside concerted spirituals in the otherwise classical repertoire of black college choirs. Moreover, separate gospel choirs were developed and eventually found wide acceptance, "although official administrative approval (and funding) were usually delayed and always apprehensive. . . . Even black college students who attend white colleges and universities have often established gospel choirs as an affirmation and continuation of their heritage."⁷

Indeed, black gospel choirs are present at public and private colleges and universities all over the U.S., including those whose student bodies are predominantly white. To designate the proliferation of collegiate gospel choirs as a movement seems appropriate, since they emerged as student-initiated organizations during the peak period of black student involvement in public protests, political organizations, and demands for black studies programs, outlasting many other institutionalized expressions of black awareness among college students.

Howard University Gospel Choir

The Howard University Gospel Choir was organized in 1969. At a worship service celebrating the choir's twenty-fifth anniversary in the spring of 1994, it was reported that two female students organized the choir after they each had dreamed of such a singing group and shared their dreams with each other. At the time, students who majored in music

⁷C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 363.

were required to sing in the university choir for the worship services at Rankin Chapel, whose repertoire excluded gospel music, clapping, holy dancing, or any other bodily movement with the music. Some students felt the need to sing music that reflected their own sense of religious and cultural authenticity, and the gospel choir gave them that opportunity. The choir quickly became a spiritual community which reflected the ecstatic worship and the moral rigorism of the Sanctified Church tradition. Students were able to sing, clap, shout, and move with the music as they pleased. Several persons have testified that they were saved, or miraculously rescued from danger while in the choir, after having experienced collegiate life as a period of seeking adult identity, rejecting their "church upbringing," being influenced by peers, and partying. The choir sponsored its own Bible studies, prayer meetings, and worship services. Clearly and unequivocally, the Pentecostal perspective emerged as a dominant factor in determining the direction of the choir and its repertoire.

There remains a definite tension between Pentecostalism and more quietistic expressions of denominational Protestantism at Howard. Worship in Rankin Chapel has been supervised by four deans: Howard Thurman (1933-1944), Daniel C. Hill Jr. (1945-1958), Evans Crawford (1958-1993), and Bernard Richardson, who assumed the position in 1993. Thurman, a Baptist minister noted for his mystical approaches to religion, instituted interpretive dance and drama to enhance worship during his tenure.⁸ Crawford, who received his doctorate in social ethics at Boston University, teaches homiletics at the School of Divinity and is a United Methodist minister. Although his preferred worship demeanor as chapel dean was

⁸See Alton B. Pollard III, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

contemplative and quietistic, he welcomed the participation of Pentecostal students in the religious life of the university. Richardson, a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, has pursued a similar policy of openness and inclusiveness with respect to Pentecostals at Howard. Gospel music was performed at his installation service on January 23, 1994, and several months later he invited the Howard Gospel Choir to provide the music for services at Rankin Chapel one Sunday each month. This is significant because gospel music previously had been excluded from the chapel repertoire and from other official university-sponsored services and ceremonies. It took twenty-five years for the Howard Gospel Choir to be endorsed and accepted in this way.

Black Identity and Pentecostalism

The relationship between black identity and Pentecostal religion at Howard University has been addressed in an article by Pentecostal Chaplain Stephen Short, "Pentecostal Student Movement at Howard: 1946-1977." His records indicate that Pentecostal students first organized themselves at Howard in 1946 but did not receive official university recognition until 1966. Bishop Monroe Saunders of the United Church of Jesus Christ (Apostolic) was at the time a graduate student at the Howard School of Divinity. He had organized the Pentecostal student movement at Morgan State University and Coppin State College. He persuaded a member of the faculty of divinity to serve as adviser to the United Pentecostal Association, who subsequently refused to sign the necessary permission forms for the group to have a gospel concert on campus unless it could be guaranteed that "no one would shout, 'get happy,' or otherwise express himself in the

prevailing emotional patterns common to the Pentecostal church."⁹

In the spring of 1969, Howard University was shut down by students as an act of protest. Subsequently, the student activity requirements were relaxed so that advisors did not necessarily have to be members of the Howard faculty or staff. The United Pentecostal Association then sponsored a highly successful gospel concert without the blessing of its faculty advisor. In response to the concert publicity, Short, a pastor of an independent storefront church in Washington, volunteered his services as faculty advisor. He organized the First Intercollegiate Pentecostal Conference at Howard in 1970, which drew 4,000 participants representing twenty-six states, including blacks, whites, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, classical Pentecostals, and charismatics. As a result of the conference, Dean Crawford formally accredited Short as Pentecostal Chaplain of Howard University, the first such appointment ever made to a major college or university.¹⁰

In 1974, the name of the student organization was changed after an inquiry by the charismatic Episcopal priest Father Dennis Bennett who wanted to know if the name "United Pentecostal" referred to the Oneness denomination. The students intended to convey the idea of Pentecostals being united—they were unaware that the United Pentecostal Church was the name of a white Pentecostal body. To avoid confusion, and to bring attention to the Black founder of Pentecostalism, the students changed the name of their group to the William J. Seymour Pentecostal Fellowship of Howard University. In 1976, the Fellowship purchased the first Pentecostal center to be located at a major university in the

⁹Stephen N. Short, "Pentecostal Student Movement at Howard: 1946-1977," *Spirit* 1 (1977): 15.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 17.

world, Seymour House, which "offers a full spectrum of services that include recreation, meals, counseling, Bible classes, seminars and workshops, emergency housing on a limited basis, and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ."¹¹

Black Student Rebellion

It is evident, then, that both the gospel choir and the Pentecostal fellowship in its present form are related to the 1969 black student rebellion at Howard University. Students promoting racial justice and seeking free expression of cultural identity encountered the same forms of intransigence at black institutions as at white ones. That these developments should occur at a black university should come as no surprise, given the historical orientation of many black institutions of higher education to acculturation and assimilation into the dominant culture.

As early as 1932, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about the tendency of Negro schools to encourage individual pursuit of self-realization without attacking the social injustices from which the Negro suffers. He was highly critical of the attitudes and behavior of educated Negroes with respect to the disinherited masses: "The progress of the Negro race, for instance, is retarded by the inclination of many able and educated Negroes to strive for identification and assimilation with the more privileged white race and to [minimize] their relation to a subject race as much as possible."¹²

The push for gospel choirs, black student unions, black studies, and the like represented the black students' desire to identify with the "subject race" in the struggle for liberation

¹¹Ibid., 21.

¹²Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, [1932]), 253, 274.

and justice while enrolled in schools intended to prepare them for a more privileged existence. Black students at Howard demanded the institution of black studies programs in much the same manner as their peers at predominantly white universities, perhaps feeling their protest to be even more clearly justified on the basis of the existence of a black majority of students and faculty. Moreover, the general disdain many elite educated blacks have had for Pentecostalism remains problematic for Pentecostal students who have expressed feelings of rejection, ridicule, and unfair treatment because of their religious beliefs and practices.

The marginalization of Pentecostalism on campus is certainly not unique to black higher education. One of the most important documents of the black student protest era, *Black Studies in the University*,¹³ hardly mentions the Black Church or religion as a factor in black-student consciousness or intellectual life. However, at Yale a black worship service and a gospel choir were established during this time. At Yale and elsewhere, the gospel choir emerged as the core of black Christian identity for students who have felt marginalized on the basis of race, sex, culture, economic status, and religion. Noting that the "suspicion and disapprobation that have dogged Pentecostals throughout their history are still present in academic circles," theologian Harvey Cox has commented that a Pentecostal student at Harvard was inspired to "come out of the closet" only after Cox's course on Pentecostalism appeared cited in the catalog.¹⁴

¹³See Armstead L. Robinson, ed., *Black Studies in the University: A Symposium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

¹⁴Harvey Cox Jr., "Some Personal Reflections on Pentecostalism," *Pneuma. The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, 15 (Spring 1993): 33. Cox claims that his course on Pentecostalism was a "roaring success," probably the "most cosmopolitan class meeting anywhere at Harvard," drawing students from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the U.S.

Historical Black Colleges and Gospel Choirs

The proliferation of gospel choirs during and after 1969 included virtually all the historically black colleges and universities. Collegiate gospel choirs quickly emerged as a national phenomenon. Some schools provided administrative support and rehearsal facilities for these choirs and stipends for directors and accompanists. The Howard Gospel Choir recorded their first album, "Beginning" in 1972, with endorsements from the Honorable Walter E. Fauntroy, Delegate to the U.S. Congress from the District of Columbia; the Honorable Walter Washington, Mayor of the District of Columbia; Dr. James E. Cheek, President of Howard University; gospel artist Myrna Summers; and Howard alumna Pearl Williams-Jones. The Modern Black Mass Choir of Fisk University issued their "First Time Around" album on Nashboro's Creed label in 1973. This gospel choir was first formed in 1969 to participate in a "Week of Reckoning" held on Fisk University's campus. In 1976, CBS Records released on the TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia) label the "Third Annual National Black College Gospel Festival" as a two-volume album set featuring twenty-two collegiate gospel choirs.¹⁵ One of the groups represented, "The Sounds of Blackness" of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, has produced several highly successful recordings in recent years with significant crossover appeal, buoyed by occasional

¹⁵Bethune-Cookman College, Eastern Kentucky University, Florida A&M University, Florida State University, Georgia College, Georgia State College, Jackson State University, Kentucky State University, Marshall University, Miles College, Morehead State University, North Carolina A&T University, Ohio State University, Macalester College, University of Kentucky, University of Louisville, University of North Carolina, University of Southern Florida, Quinnipac College, Wayne State University, West Virginia Institute of Technology.

appearances on nationally televised programs. At Morgan State University, gospel music is incorporated into the standard repertoire of the university choir. At Harvard University, the "*Kuumba Singers*" (Swahili for "creativity") present themselves as a black choir rather than a gospel choir, and their name avoids the direct Christian witness implicit in the term "gospel."

Gospel Choirs and Sanctified Churches

The gospel choir movement in the U.S. reflects the general orientation of the Sanctified churches toward ecclesial reform, cultural resistance, and revolution or rebellion. The choirs have been ecumenical in composition, having attracted students from a variety of religious backgrounds, even in cases where the music and worship associated with these groups has been predominantly Pentecostal. Often students with no interest or involvement in religion join the choirs because of the music and fellowship. Here ecclesial reform should be interpreted not in terms of the choirs' measurable impact upon the established churches, but rather as the representation of a viable alternative for students whose cultural and spiritual needs are not being met by established campus ministries, university choirs, or local churches. Despite the movement's alleged anti-intellectual biases and appeal to "ignorant" and uneducated blacks, the Sanctified Church has traditionally encouraged its saints in higher education to acquire "the learning" without losing "the burning."¹⁶ The gospel choirs have reinforced this exhortation in the minds of Holiness-Pentecostal students in pursuit of "the learning," while offering to other students an initial exposure to black religious fervor, that is, "the burning."

¹⁶Gilkes, "Together and in Harness," 687.

The cultural resistance of black students to the pressure to assimilate the particular values, practices, and attitudes of the university setting and the societal classes it emulates has been a critical determinant of the success and distinctiveness of the gospel choir movement. These choirs provide black students with a space or context for worship and performance in relative isolation from the critique of individuals who do not comprehend or appreciate black culture. More importantly, the lyrics and rhythms of gospel music provide an aesthetically pleasing and spiritually enriched "kinetic vocabulary" through which black students can articulate their collective needs, perceptions, impressions, and responses.¹⁷ It is probably an exaggeration to designate the gospel choir movement as a "revolution," but it represents one of the most vital ongoing institutional expressions of the ubiquitous student rebellions of the late 1960s.

In the heat of protest, it was not unusual for the more secularized and politically-oriented black students to criticize the gospel choirs as counter-revolutionary. However, in retrospect these groups have manifested black awareness and identity in concrete, visible forms. "I Believe," a selection from the *Africa to America* release by "The Sounds of Blackness," was used as a campaign theme in Marion Barry's successful bid in the fall of 1994 to be re-elected for a fourth term as mayor of Washington, DC after having been convicted and imprisoned for using illegal drugs. The song echoes Barry's emphasis upon black redemption, identity and empowerment. In the liner notes accompanying that recording

¹⁷Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, "Dancing to Rebalance the Universe: African American Secular Dance and Spirituality," *Black Sacred Music* 7 (Spring 1993): 17.

is an explicit statement of exilic identity which is representative of the spirit of the collegiate gospel choir movement:

We especially thank God for 'Africa the Motherland,' Her mighty kingdoms and royal people—our ancestors, whose faith, strength, perseverance and resilience empowered us to survive and create a family of musical styles that has profoundly influenced this entire planet. We are the true Kings and Queens of Swing, Rock & Roll, African melodies, Work Songs, Field Hollers, Spirituals, Jubilees, Blues, Ragtime, Jazz, Gospel, Rhythm & Blues, Soul, Funk, Reggae, Hip-Hop, Be-Bop and Pop. Our music is our life blood, our legacy, our heritage and our testimony. Therefore, we praise God for all of our music, that [God] alone has blessed us to share with the rest of the world—on our terms.¹⁸

These choirs have provided a context for black students to give voice and rhythm to their exilic consciousness in the campus setting, by singing the Lord's song in a strange land of intellectual, social, cultural, and religious alienation.

¹⁸"The Sounds of Blackness," *Africa to America: The Journey of the Drum*, compact disc, Perspective Records, 1994.



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