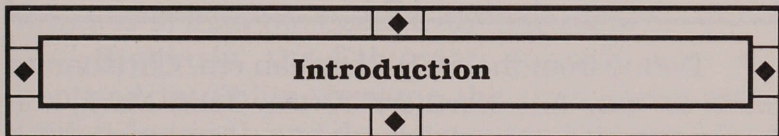


From Strength to Strength: A Brief History of the Black Church in America*



Any history of the Black Church in America requires tracing that history to Africa, since this is the origin of the people of the Black Church. Further, this discussion assists in refuting the felt and expressed position of some anthropologists, historians and theologians who portray Africa as an uncivilized, "dark" and jungle-filled continent that has contributed nothing of value to the world. For it is common knowledge today that Africa is, not only the cradle of humankind, but the source of civilization as well. The culture, especially the religious, that influenced European and Middle East life and thought had its genesis in northern Africa, especially in Kemet (ancient Egypt), Ethiopia and Nubia, now Sudan. Historically, systematic efforts have been mounted to rob Africa of its rich culture—including its advanced technology—by stripping Egypt and Saharan Africa from the southern portions of the continent. Achieving this, it has been possible to present a scenario that supported the view that Africans had made no

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major contributions to world civilization.¹





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◆	Early Christianity in Saharan Africa	◆
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Dating from the early Christian era, Christianity made its way into Northern Africa. John Mark, the evangelist, according to tradition, went to Egypt and

For a discussion of Africa—especially Egypt—as both the cradle of humankind and the source of civilization, see Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. and ed. Mercer Cook (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974); Asa G. Hilliard, III, *The Maroon Within Us: Selected Essays on African American Community Socialization* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1995); Hilliard, *Free Your Mind: Return to the Source: African Origins: A Selected Classified Bibliography and Outline on African-American History from Ancient Times to the Present* (Atlanta: Wa'set Educational Publications, 1991); Charles S. Finch, *The African Background to Medical Science: Essays on African History, Science and Civilization* (London: Karnak House, 1990); Ivan Van Sertima, ed., *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern* (originally published in *Journal of African Civilizations* 5 (April and November 1983); Charles B. Copher, "Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black People," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XIII (Spring 1986): 225-246; George G. M. James, *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992). **For representative text/bibliographies concerning the history of the African American Church,** see Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Kenneth Henry and Albert Raboteau, *The Black Church: A Bibliography* (n.p., 1969). (This work is available from Professor Henry, Interdenominational Theological Center, or from *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 700 Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, Atlanta, GA 30314); Monroe Nathan Work, *A Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America* (New York: Argosy-Antiquarian, 1965); Nelson Rollins Burr, *A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America, Religion in American Life*, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

established the Egyptian Coptic Church.² This historic church is known for its monophysitism, a concept that affirms Christ possessed only a divine nature. This doctrinal position, of course, denied his humanity. It was this issue that ultimately led to the Coptic withdrawal from the Council of Chalcedon.

Similarly, the Ethiopian eunuch, who was baptized by Philip, became the first harbinger of Christian growth and development in Ethiopia.³ From Ethiopia and Egypt, Christianity spread to modern-day Sudan and was dominant until its influence waned in the sixth century, the result of Moslem expansion.



Economic and Religious Penetration



The introduction of Christianity into the interior of the continent involved searching for new sources of animal skins, agricultural products and for gold. Antão Gonçalves, a youthful Portuguese mariner, made a foray into Western Africa in 1441 A.D. seeking slaves, animal skins and oil. From these beginnings, the slave traffic—

²The word "Copt" is derived from "Hikaptah," one of the names for Memphis, the first capital of Kemet (ancient Egypt). For discussions of the Coptic Church, see Otto Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Ancient and Modern* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1977); Jill Kamil, *Coptic Egypt: History and Guide* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1987); Nicholas Zernov, *Eastern Christendom: A Study of the Origin and Development of Eastern Orthodox Church* (London: Weidenfold and Nicolson, 1961). Internet site: <http://pharos.bu.edu/cn/Menu.html#christian>.

³Acts 8:27-40 discusses the Ethiopian eunuch and his baptism by Philip, and tradition claims that the eunuch established the Christian Church in Ethiopia.

and the economic rape of so vast a continent—began and rapidly spread. Portugal soon had serious competition from Spain, England, France, Denmark, Sweden, Holland and Germany. Shiploads of Black humanity were forced into the hulls of slavers and, at first, were sent to Europe where labor was scarce and the economy was receptive. Spain soon broadened the scope and profitability of this endeavor by crossing the Atlantic Ocean to dispose of an ever-increasing supply of human chattel.

The exploration of the African coast, followed closely by expansionist Christian missionaries, brought the Bible and prayer to Africa. When the Africans' eyes were closed, the traders and missionaries took the land and the Africans were left with the Bible and prayer. In the process a *coup de grâce* was delivered to an unsuspecting continent. The most heinous of these destabilizing events was the dismantling of a traditionally firm and extensive family structure. Husbands, wives and children were deliberately separated as slave traffic became a massive industry.

African leaders—chiefs—were rapidly recruited; they would leave their tribal group and raid other tribes or clans, delivering captives in chains to the numerous trading stations which soon dotted the Atlantic coast. I have visited several of these stations and was appalled by the savagery of slavery. For their participation in such barbarism the chiefs were given trinkets—mirrors, pieces of copper wire and glass beads.

From these staging areas slaves were sent by ship to the West Indies, primarily the result of Spain's trading interests. The next movement was to the United States. Healthy male slaves would bring an average of \$60; a

female, one-fourth that amount. Disease, insurrection and suicide accounted for the death of a significant percentage of the slaves, by now economically designated as "Black Ivory" or "Black Gold." It is said that man-eating sharks trailed ships to devour the bodies of those thrown overboard because they had died or had attempted escape. While alive, they occupied a space hardly capable of accommodating the average male body.

An indomitability⁴ about the slaves, however, allowed them to call upon their common African heritage for solace, aiding their acculturation in the Americas. Their backward glance assured them of their basic worth, their ties with ancestors and the extended family. Their worldview and value systems provided support against the dehumanizing exploits which robbed them of vestiges of humanity. Similarly, the conditions of slavery in America were understood to be the work of greedy plantation owners rather than the will of the God, the supreme being they knew as Africans, as well as the God of their new Christian exposure. Their *basic* religious faith buoyed them and became their chief support in withstanding the indignities to which they were subjected.

These new statuesque, ebony Americans were thought to be without soul and, therefore, beyond Christian moral influence. They were considered to be infidels. Although an unwritten law in the West Indies

⁴Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 92; Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 26-28.

sanctioned immediate freedom for slaves converted to Christianity, this semi-legal provision was the bane of the colonists' existence in America. Confronted with the expectation of freeing their slaves, they faced the dilemma of doing so and losing the free labor which made cotton "king," thereby forming the infrastructure for building an entire economy.

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◆	Free Labor vs. Free Persons	◆
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Obviously, the plantation owner's personal interests were served by withholding the Christian faith from the slave.⁵ However, the Christian church was also caught on the horns of this dilemma. For many owners were the members of the churches and could not be brought to divorce the mandates of their religion from the practicality of their economic order. Thus, laws were passed and enforced that Blacks were not to be taught to read or converted to Christianity. With few exceptions, most notably the efforts of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, this represented the prevailing condition in the agricultural south.

The Society began in London in 1701, intending to prepare Indians and Blacks to understand church

⁵See Raboteau, chapter 3, "Catechesis and Conversion," in *Slave Religion*, 96-150; Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 3d ed. (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1985), 1-19.

doctrines. Soon there were cracks in the walls of entrenched feelings about any conversion of Blacks to Jesus Christ. Many slaveholders began to teach reading to their human property, primarily from the Bible. Some churches sent missionaries to work among Blacks. In fact, church records and missionary diaries are replete with glowing accounts of slaves who had taken instruction and had become Christians.

Charles Colcock Jones, a Presbyterian missionary to Blacks in Liberty County, Georgia, wrote a catechism for the religious instruction of slaves. The following account described pictorially the attitude of the slave toward the institution of slavery. He states:

I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle of Philemon; and when I insisted on fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants, and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves; and those who remained looked anything but satisfied with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared that there was no such Epistle in the Bible; others that it was not the Gospel; others, that I preached to please the masters; others, that they did not care if they never heard me preach again.⁶

It is clear that the slaves were theologically astute. Their astuteness lay in the fact that they, in the words

⁶Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: T. Purse Co., 1842), 126.

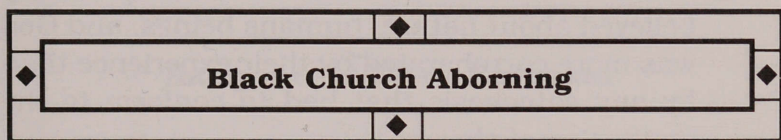
of Gayraud Wilmore, “. . . recognized the gross inconsistency between the allegation that this all-powerful God of the whites could care so much about their eternal salvation while remaining indifferent to the powerlessness and wretchedness of their condition.”⁷ Wilmore continues, “Even though they adopted the outward appearance of Christian conversion, they took from it only what proved efficacious for easing the burden of their captivity, and gave little attention to the rest.”⁸

As Blacks learned to read the English language, thus utilizing the Bible as their main textbook, an empowerment can be detected in their demeanor and resolve to resist the ravages of their existential condition. Much that they read in their Bibles was diametrically opposed to what they experienced on a daily basis. Thus, a kind of militant disregard for the slaveholder's religion emerged. Also, a number of slave rebellions occurred, most notably the insurrection of Denmark Vesey in Charleston, South Carolina, which led to the arrest and execution of many slaves. A similar insurrection was spearheaded by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831. In both instances, and in other less-known cases, the leaders of these revolts were slave preachers who had grown weary of the degradation of their current status and the exasperation of waiting for the freedom promised in their new textbook of rebellion, the *Holy Bible*. Such has been the case throughout Africa for the past quarter century leading to and following independence from

⁷Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 11.

⁸Ibid.

colonial rule. Such is the case now in South Africa where brave and Christian men such as Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak are bringing a revolutionary Bible to bear on a devilishly entrenched and systemically practiced policy of apartheid.



Through the efforts of missionary preachers, a few benevolent slaveholders and a growing competence of the slaves themselves, a dynamic church was aborning that had freedom and full humanity at its roots. Many of the slave preachers were "stem winders." That is, they preached with power, conviction and were convincing to their audiences. White slaveholders would often attend the worship services, sitting in the buildings where the worship was being held or under a brush arbor. The Old Testament with its liberation themes, especially the accounts of deliverance, covenant and salvation were popular texts. Preaching was given substance and hope with the inclusion of the life and teachings of Jesus. It was necessary, though, to give different inflections to these teachings, different from the concepts shared with them by their white overlords. Love, for example, meant something altogether different. The Apostle Paul was seldom used because he condoned the practice of slavery. Wilmore gives helpful insights into the content of "slave religion":

The absence of theological interest among the slaves was due, most of all, to the practical and

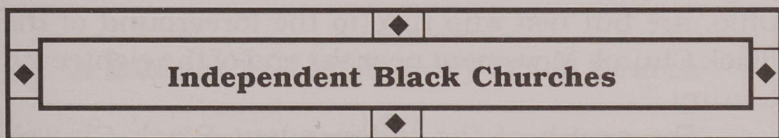
experiential nature of their religion in which the existence of a Supreme Being, the reality of the spirit world, and the revelatory significance of symbols and myths were all taken for granted and required no explicit theological formulation in the Western sense. Indeed, what they already believed about nature, humans beings, and God was more corroborated by their experience than by any catechesis that had to conform to the institution of slavery.⁹

Worship for the slave was anything but a staid, nonchalant experience, for it involved mind and body. Expressions of joy were uttered with great emotional intensity, as was the wailing of sorrow. The reality of God's supreme nature was never in question and was always affirmed as a *sine qua non*. Likewise, the shouts, hollers, wails and moans spawned by confrontation with the weight of life as lived on a daily basis were also affirmed with equal vigor. The religion of the slave embraced the totality of life, the sacred and profane—the joyful and the sorrowful, the good and the evil. The slaves' African roots had prepared them admirably for this holistic view of reality that characterizes life in Africa.

Prior to the latter part of the eighteenth century, the slave worshiped in the balcony of the master's church or in the "steal away" parts of the plantation, that is, by the river banks or in other places of quiet retreat. Fanned by a growing sense of dignity, a flaming desire to be free and a dissatisfaction with the order and sterility of the white church, there began a

⁹Ibid.

movement to establish independent churches. Being relegated to the balconies in order to participate in an unfulfilling worship experience, and a yearning for change, fanned the flames of an independent church movement in both North and South.



Independent Black Churches

In the South, the Baptists and Methodists had the greatest appeal to the slaves because of their worship style; their music and fervor were more lively than that of the Presbyterians, Anglicans and Congregationalists. Therefore, it was understandable that they were predisposed toward these communions. The first Black Baptist Church in America was established in Silver Bluff, South Carolina (across the river from Augusta, Georgia) in 1773 under the leadership of George Liele and David George.¹⁰ Andrew Bryan, baptized by Liele, became the organizer of the African Baptist Church in Savannah, the second Black Baptist church in the United States, as Liele awaited in Savannah for transportation to Jamaica.¹¹

¹⁰Woodson, *History Negro Church*, 35. A discrepancy exists between Woodson and C. Eric Lincoln concerning the founding date of the Silver Bluff Baptist Church, Savannah, GA. For a discussion of this issue, see C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), chapter 2, "The Black Baptists: The First Black Churches in America," 20-46, especially note 6.

¹¹Woodson, 74.

Numerous Black preachers of different denominational persuasions mesmerized congregations, Black and white, with their eloquence and fervor. Preachers such as Black Harry, a traveling companion of Bishop Asbury and John Stewart, a scholarly preacher of renown to whites, Blacks and Indians in Ohio, are but two who rose to the foreground of the Black Church Movement near the end of the eighteenth century.¹²

The zenith of the independent Black Church Movement was reached in 1787 when Richard Allen, a Philadelphia-born slave, withdrew from Saint George Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia.¹³ He, Absalom Jones and William White had forcibly been removed from the church as they prayed. Richard Allen then became the founder of Bethel Church and later was consecrated the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

In rapid succession there was a spate of independent churches established; the Presbyterians in 1807,¹⁴ the African Methodist Episcopal Zion in 1820.¹⁵ The Protestant Episcopal Movement toward "blackenization" was initiated by Absalom Jones who, with John Allen and others, had withdrawn from the St. George Methodist Episcopal Church. Jones was the first ordained Black Episcopal priest.¹⁶ Other major

¹²Wilmore, *Black Religion*, chapter 4, "The Black Church Freedom Movement," 74-98.

¹³Lincoln, *Black Church*, chapter 3, "The African Methodist Episcopal Church," 50-56.

¹⁴Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 89-95.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁶Lincoln, *Black Church*, 51.

Black denominations such as the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (1870)¹⁷ and Church of God in Christ (1907),¹⁸ as well as numerous smaller “holiness” bodies, came into being during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth.

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A Militant and Missionary Black Church

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The Black Christian Church has always been a hybrid version of mainline Christianity in America. It has been in the tradition of major Protestant and Catholic bodies. However, it has had a distinctiveness born of the “Black Religious Experience,”—a term used to define both the historic and existential realities of Black life and thought. While using the same aids to worship as the dominant white structure, the results are enlivened, enriched and made more appealing.

It is important to note here that the slave and those who advocated the slave’s cause were not merely passive, accepting their lot with meek abandon. They worked toward their salvation and freedom in a very active manner. We have already mentioned persons like Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Henry Highland Garnet, Henry McNeal Turner, Frederick Douglass and many others were strong and persistent voices attacking the cesspools of slavery and forced segregation. Addressing the 1843 meeting of the National Convention of Colored Americans in Buffalo, New York, Garnet said:

¹⁷Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 91.

¹⁸Lincoln, *Black Church*, 81.

Let your motto be resistance! *resistance!* RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance. What kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you, and according to the suggestion of expediency, Brethren, adieu! Trust in the living God. Labor for the peace of the human race, and remember that you are FOUR MILLIONS.¹⁹

Black Nationalism²⁰ and Pan-Africanism²¹ characterized the ethos of the emerging Black Church. Zeal for sharing the tenets of the Christian faith with Africa and the Caribbean became a passionate drive for many. Thus, ministries to Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Congo, Jamaica and other countries became commonplace.

Under the leadership of the American Colonization Society,²² Black religious leaders became missionized in their concern for the people of their homeland. Daniel Coker, Edward Blyden, Henry McNeal Turner, John Kizzel, Lott Carey, Paul Cuffee and others became leading exponents of sharing new Christian insights with brothers and sisters in Africa and elsewhere. Turner espoused a "Back to Africa" viewpoint as vigorously as did Marcus Garvey almost a century later.

¹⁹Carter G. Woodson, *Negro Orators and their Orations* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1925), 157.

²⁰For a discussion of this concept, see Wilmore, 99-134.

²¹*Ibid.*, 134, 151.

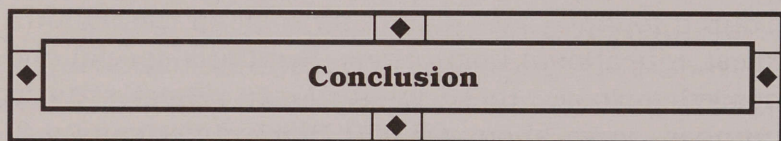
²²Henry N. Sherwood, "The Formation of the American Colonization Society," *Journal of Negro History* 2 (July 1917): 209-228.

The Black Church has had to fulfill all the spiritual, social and educational needs of the Black Community. Thus, it has been church, gymnasium and academy. It has been the initiator and supporter of savings institutions, burial and benevolent associations, insurance companies, community centers and tenant associations. By the husbanding of meager personal resources and the beneficence of predominantly white missionary efforts, the Black Church founded and maintains some of the nation's finest educational institutions. Serving a special and needed purpose, these institutions, almost sixty in number, serve about 60,000 Black Americans and others. They are probably the greatest gift of the Black Church to life in America.

Historically and currently, the clergy of the Black Church have been community leaders. Earlier theirs was often the only literate voice in a community. Superintendency from this group in a variety of areas was not only desired but expected. Over the past fifty years the base of educational and occupational options has broadened, as has the securing of a formal education. This accounts for the fact that a growing number of eager Black youth are entering a variety of fields made necessary by John Naisbitt's description of the "information age."

It is no surprise, then, that a disproportionate number of America's Black political and social leaders have come from the ranks of Black clergy. Andrew Young (Mayor of Atlanta), Martin Luther King (Nobel Prize Winner and Civil Rights Leader), Jesse Jackson (1984 candidate for the Presidency of the United States), William Gray (Congressperson from Philadelphia),

Gardner C. Taylor (pastor of Concord Baptist Church, Harlem) and others are but examples of the extent of vital leadership conceived and supported by the Black Church in America. This Church, embracing at least two-thirds of all Black Americans—actively or nominally—is Black America's richest, most free, most vocal and most easily mobilized resource. Its past has been significant; however, its future is unlimited.



We began this discourse with a brief description of the ancient culture, education, art and heritage of the African continent. The slave, though illiterate by western standards, possessed a stable religion, economy, family, worldview, and interpersonal relationships. This strength contributed greatly to the founding, growth and current condition of the Black Church in America. Thus, the process has grown from strength to strength.

There are areas of concern, however, that I wish to highlight as unfinished items for the Black witnessing community. They are:

- Continue the deepening of faith in the redeeming, freeing and revolutionary nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Continue a commitment to justice and liberation issues as a basis for fidelity to the message of Jesus Christ.

- Create a new environment that is humane and just, rather than rely upon the standards for conduct in a racist society.
- Preserve and develop a lifestyle among members that is based on spiritual values and not merely upon thoughtless adherence to the values of a materialistic society.
- Cultivate and develop deeper bonds within the Black family. (There are indices suggesting disintegration of the Black family.)
- Provide new and selfless role models for Black youth that bespeak quality lives and lifestyles.
- Mobilize the educational institutions charged with promoting the Black heritage.
- Continue the struggle, realizing with Frederick Douglass, "Where there is no struggle, there is no progress."

