Gayraud S. Wilmore

Black Religion: Strategies of Survival, Elevation, and Liberation

In a classic essay on Black religion W. E. B. DuBois wrote: "Three things characterized this religion of the slave—the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy."[1] Although this classic description captures the dynamic of the Africans' earliest appropriation of evangelical Protestantism on both sides of the Atlantic, contemporary historical studies reveal a more complex and comprehensive pattern of religious development. From a perspective that includes not only what DuBois called "an adaptation and mingling of heathen rites . . . roughly designated as Voodooism,"[2] but also the institutionalization of incipient slave worship in Black American churches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, three dominant themes or motifs stand out as foundational from the Jamestown Landing to the present. They are survival, elevation, and liberation.

It is tempting to try to encompass the entire history of Black religion in this country by arranging these motifs in chronological order. In that case paradigms of survival—the sheer effort to use religion to stay alive, to keep body and soul together—would characterize the earliest period of clandestine slave worship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; efforts to make religion a ladder for the educational, moral, and cultural elevation of resourceful individuals would cover the second period, from the 1850s through the "civilizing" efforts of White missionaries during the Reconstruction, to what Woodson called the "institutional churches" of the first half

---

[1] W. E. Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961), p. 141.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 145.

of the twentieth century;[3] and finally, the paradigm of liberation—direct action on the part of churches to free the slaves, combat racial discrimination, and garner Black political, economic, and moral power—would represent the third period, from the Civil War to the end of the twentieth century.

On closer scrutiny, however, this neat chronological order breaks down. One sees these themes entwining and overlapping in various configurations at several stages. Albeit, as this essay will show, the chronological sequence is useful. Yet, in the final analysis, it is more accurate to understand survival, elevation, and liberation as major emphases that emerged simultaneously through the entire course of African American religious history.[4]

The African Heritage

It seems incontrovertible that religious traditions brought from West Africa gave early comfort and consolation to the slaves as they were slowly acculturated to the new religion of Christianity in North America. In the beginning African traditional religions functioned as a survival strategy for the captives struggling to maintain life and sanity under bondage to White people who regarded them as little more than beasts of burden. The first Africans who were transported in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought religious beliefs and practices that prevented them from

---

[3] Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1972), p. 251.

[4] For example, a radical liberationist orientation is seen in the religiously-inspired Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner rebellions of 1822 and 1831, while the newly independent African Methodist Episcopal churches of the North were cooperating with groups like the American Moral Reform Society, seeking to elevate life in the antebellum ghettoes of the Northern cities through education and cultural refinement. Similarly, in the storefront Pentecostal churches of the innercity between the two World Wars there was a reversion to the same patterns of emotionality and other African forms of religiosity that helped the slaves keep their sanity and survive the brutality of plantation life in the late eighteenth century.

being totally dehumanized by chattel slavery. In their homeland they had shared, within many tribal groups, certain ancient ways of life—rituals, wise sayings, and ethical teachings—that had been handed down from generation to generation. Ancient beliefs, folklore, attitudes, and practices provided a holistic view of reality that made no radical separation between religion and life. There was in the affairs of everyday no consciousness that at one moment one was being religious and at another moment non-religious or secular. There was no sense that certain understandings of time, space, human affairs, or relations between human and divine beings, belonged to science or philosophy rather than to religion; to the life of the mind rather than the life of the spirit.

We must proceed carefully here. This is not to claim that the slaves and those they left behind in Africa did not perceive the difference between sacrificing a chicken to a familial god and hoeing a garden. We are not saying that Africans did not esteem some men and women more than others because of the special training and knowledge they possessed that could open up the secrets of nature, man, and God. Precisely so. But there was no absolute disjunction between the sacred and the secular. What we must understand is that the African perspective looked upon the work of the intellect and the work of the spirit as a harmonious whole, as being ultimately about the same thing. Presuppositions and experiences of the unity of body and spirit, of what we might call today the profane and the holy, was the common privilege of everyone—not the guarded sinecure of intellectuals called philosophers and religionists called priests or witch doctors.

It may be almost impossible for modern people to understand fully the way of life out of which the slaves came. We have to change our entire habit of thought about the difference between being and doing, between reflection and action, the commonplace, ordinary affairs of daily existence and what we vaguely call the "spiritual life." Only in this way can we begin to appreciate the compre-

hensive, unitary character of the African consciousness. Of course, some scholars contend that the past was almost completely obliterated for the slaves brought to North America. But let us argue, for the moment, that for those who did remember anything about their former life (and it is unreasonable to assume that everything was immediately forgotten once they disembarked on the quays of Jamestown or Charleston) there was no separation between religion and life, between the sacred and the profane. Experience was truth and truth was experience. The single entity—what we might call "life-truth"—comprehended the totality of existence. Reality was, at one and the same time, immanent and transcendent, material and spiritual, mundane and numinous.

It should not be assumed that we are dealing here with some simplistic and naive stage of humanization. The folklore of Africa, comprising thousands of myths, folktales, and proverbs still being transmitted from one generation to another, is as subtle and complex in its probity as the choicest dialectical ruminations in Plato's *Republic*. As one scholar writes concerning the excellence of the proverbs of the Yoruba people of Nigeria:

> Surely these proverbs are indications of no ordinary perception of moral truths, and are sufficient to warrant the inference that in closeness of observation, in depth of thought, and shrewd intelligence, the Yoruba is no ordinary man.[5]

Nor were Africans so unsophisticated in their ideas of God that the religions that some slaves preserved can be dismissed as grossly inadequate compared with the rarified theological ruminations of the missionaries. Not only had many been introduced to

---

[5] Richard F. Burton, *The Proverbs: Wit and Wisdom from Africa* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), p. 25

Islam and Christianity in West Africa, but their traditional religions were not inferior in insight and coherence to those two great faiths. The Nigerian author Chinua Achebe catches the keen wit and profundity of the traditional religionist, Akunna, in a confrontation with Mr. Brown, an English missionary who came to Akunna's village.

> "You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth," said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown's visits. "We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods." "There are no other gods," said Mr. Brown. "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood—like that one" (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna's carved *Ikenga* hung), and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood."
>
> "Yes," said Akunna. "It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But He made them for His messengers so that we could approach Him through them. It is like yourself. You are the head of your church."
>
> "No," protested Mr. Brown. "The head of my church is God Himself."
>
> "I know," said Akunna, "but there must be a head in this world among men. Somebody like yourself must be the head here."[6]

Achebe's deftly drawn picture of Ibo life shows the inseparable connection between the soil in which the ancestors are buried,

---

[6] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1959), p. 164.

the community, and God. It calls into question all the West's facile assumptions about the childishness of African religion and philosophy. Without it the African arrivals to the New World would have been hollow men and women. With it they were able to survive with their bodies and souls intact for the long and rugged ascent into the twentieth century.

The Christianization of the Slaves

Any analysis of Black religion in America must begin with two issues of critical importance: the attitude of White Christians toward the Christianization and emancipation of the slaves, and the nature of the earliest slave religion. The first recorded baptism of an African in the American colonies occurred in Virginia in 1624, but there was no systematic evangelization until the eighteenth century. Even then, the colonists were in no hurry to introduce their slaves to Christianity. The English rationalized the enslavement of both Africans and Indians because they were both different in appearance to themselves and because they were heathens. When it became evident that Blacks were becoming believers despite widespread neglect by official church bodies, Virginia was the first of the colonies to make short shrift of the matter by declaring in 1667 that ". . . the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom."

It was difficult enough to induce a healthy state of religion among the White population. Attempts by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, an outpost of the bishops of London, to encourage planters to provide religious instruction for their slaves were largely unsuccessful, but almost from the beginning some Blacks attended public worship and requested baptism. By the American Revolution a few had become Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists. In South Carolina, one missionary, the Reverend Samuel Thomas of Goose Creek, reported

as early as 1705 that he had given religious instruction to at least a thousand slaves, many of whom could read the Bible and were memorizing the Creed.

Taking the gospel to Blacks helped to ease the consciences of the colonial religious establishment about slavery, but it did not solve the problem completely. All of the American churches wrestled with the issue and, with the possible exception of the Quakers, finally compromised their ethical sensibilities. Bitter contention raged between Northern and Southern churchmen and as early as 1837 there were splits among the Lutherans and Presbyterians. In 1844 the Methodist Church divided North and South over slavery, followed by the Baptists in 1845. The antislavery American Missionary Association virtually split the Congregational Church in 1846. The Presbyterians finally set up Northern and Southern branches in 1861 and a fissure opening up in the Episcopal Church was aborted in 1862 by the refusal of Northern Episcopalians to recognize that any controversy existed. Both the Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches, with some difficulty, were able to maintain structural unity throughout the Civil War.

The Evolution of Black Christianity

During the anguish in the White churches over slavery, the special nature of Black Christianity asserted itself. We do not know when the first slaves stole away from the surveillance of the masters to worship in their own way. Two conjectures seem reasonable. First, it must have been early in the seventeenth century, for Africans would not have neglected practicing their ancestral religion altogether, and the Whites did little to induce them to adopt theirs. Secondly, it is unlikely that the worship they engaged in was devoid of transplanted survivals from Africa. Today most scholars accept the position of W. E. B. DuBois and Melville Herskovits that fragments of African religion survived the Middle Passage and the

"breaking-in" process in North America, to reappear under disguise in the early religious meetings of the "Invisible Institution"—the proto-church of the slaves. One contemporary secular scholar writes:

> In the United States, many African religious rites were fused into one—voodoo. From the whole panoply of African deities, the slaves chose the snake god of the Whydah, Fon, and Ewe. Symbolic of the umbilical cord and the rainbow, the snake embodied the dynamic, changing quality of life. In Africa it was sometimes the god of fertility and the determiner of good and ill fortune. Only by worshipping the god could one invoke his protective spirit.[7]

There is scant evidence that Voodoo or some discrete form of reinterpreted African religion synthesized as effectively with Protestantism in the English colonies as it did with Roman Catholicism in the Caribbean and Latin America. Nevertheless, reports of missionaries and slave narratives show that the African conjurer and medicine man, the manipulation of charms and talismans, and the use of drums and dancing, were present in the slaves quarters as survival strategies, even after conversion. Selective elements of African religions were not easily exterminated. A Presbyterian missionary, the Reverend Charles C. Jones, described what he encountered among the slaves as late as 1842:

> True religion they are inclined to place in profession, in forms and ordinances, and in excited states of feeling. And true conversion in dreams, visions, trances, voices—all bearing a perfect or striking

[7] John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 33.

> resemblance to some form or type which has been handed down for generations, or which has been originated in the wild fancy of some religious teacher among them.[8]

Mr. Jones warned his fellow missionaries that the Blacks displayed sophisticated perversions of the gospel accountable only to the influence of African survivals. So impressed was he with their covert resistance to White Christianity that he compared their objections to "the ripe scholarship and profound intelligence of critics and philosophers." African religion—childlike?

The First Black Churches

Although there was a Black congregation on the plantation of William Byrd III, near Mecklenburg, Virginia as early as 1758,[9] the first Black-led churches formed along the Savannah River in Georgia and South Carolina in the 1770s, and in the North at about the same time. Immediately following the Revolution Black imitations of White Baptist and Methodist churches appeared in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York City. But in the Sea Islands off South Carolina and Georgia, in Louisiana, and on scattered plantations across the Southeast, a distinctive form of Black folk religion flourished and infused the adopted White evangelicalism with retentions of African spirituality. A new and implacable African American Christianity was being created, much less puritanical and otherworldly than its White counterpart. The three best-known slave revolts were led by fervently religious men—Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822, and Nat Turner in

---

[8] Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: T. Purse Company, 1842), p. 125.

[9] Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 296.

1831. Studies of the music of the early Black Church show that hidden rebelliousness and a desire for emancipation were often expressed in song. The independent Black churches—particularly the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ)—were "freedom churches" in the sense that their latent, if not manifest, concern was liberation from slavery and elevation to a higher status through education and self-help.

David George, who served as de facto pastor of an independent Black congregation at Silver Bluff, S.C., before 1775; George Liele and Andrew Bryan of the First Colored Baptist Church in Savannah; Josiah Bishop of Portsmouth, Virginia, and other preachers—from 1760 to 1795—were all former slaves who ministered in hostile territory under the sponsorship and with the encouragement of radical White Baptist preachers. Some among them, like the full-blooded African, "Uncle Jack," "Black Harry" Hosier, who served the Methodist bishop Francis Asbury, and the many illiterate preachers mentioned in missionary reports and other sources, are almost legendary. Many of their sermons dealt with the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian captivity, the stories of heroism and faithfulness in the Old Testament, and the identification of Jesus with the poor and downtrodden masses. Though mainly untutored, but rarely unsophisticated, they told "many-a-truth in a joke," as the saying goes, slyly philosophizing about how "God don't like ugly," and "everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin' there," obliquely reassuring their congregations of the ultimate vindication of their suffering. Moreover, many animal tales, adages, and proverbs that make up the corpus of Black foklore were repeated from the pulpit as homiletical devices, as one preacher said, to "explain the unexplainable, define the indefinable, and unscrew the inscrutable."

The theological motif of these early preachers was survival by virtue of supernatural power available to believers. They were preoccupied with maintaining their people's sanity, keeping them

alive, helping them to retain some semblance of personhood and self-esteem in the face of massive dehumanization. Blassingame writes:

> One of the primary reasons the slaves were able to survive the cruelty they faced was that their behavior was not totally dependent on their masters . . . In religion, a slave exercised his own independence of conscience. Convinced that God watched over him, the slave bore his earthly afflictions in order to earn a heavenly reward. Often he disobeyed his earthly master's rules to keep his Heavenly Master's commandments . . . Religious faith gave an ultimate purpose to his life, a sense of communal fellowship and personal worth, and reduced suffering from fear and anxiety.[10]

Development of the Northern Churches

A somewhat different tradition developed among Black churches in the North. Many of their pastors also emerged from slavery and humble rural backgrounds. But in the freer atmosphere of the North the theological content of their religion took a different turn. It tended toward the ethical revivalism that inundated White Protestant churches following the Second Great Awakening (1790-1815). It was more urbane, more appealing to those Blacks who were beginning to enjoy a relative measure of prosperity and greater educational opportunities.

After Richard Allen and Absalom Jones protested racial segregation by walking out of St. George's Methodist Church in

---

[10] Blassingame, *Slave Community*, p. 206.

Philadelphia in 1787, they founded a quasi-religious community organization called the Free African Society which was replicated in other cities. In Baltimore, New York, Providence, and Boston, these associations—dedicated to the educational, moral, and religious uplift of Africans—became the scaffolding of the Black churches of the North. Immediately following voluntary or forced separation from the White churches, African Americans demonstrated an overarching interest in social, economic, and political advancement by making their new churches the center of such activities. They were aided by White friends such as Anthony Benezet and Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia in organizing and funding their benevolent societies, but their churches were the main engines driving all "secular" enterprise. The primary impulse behind these Northern developments was a desire for autonomy, racial solidarity, self-help, and personal and group elevation.

Thus, Peter Spencer formed a new denomination, the Union Church of African Members, in Wilmington, Delaware in 1813;[11] Richard Allen, became the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in Philadelphia in 1816; James Varick, the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, founded in New York in 1821. These men, together with Absalom Jones, rector of St. Thomas Episcopal Church of Africans in Philadelphia; John Gloucester, pastor of the First African Presbyterian Church of the same city; Peter Williams, Jr., the first ordained Black priest of the Episcopal Church in New York, and Thomas Paul, founder of the first Black Baptist Church, also in New York City, were all strong, progressive leaders who, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, promoted education and social betterment as a religious obligation. They encouraged Northern lay people to undertake racial progress programs and

---

[11] Lewis V. Baldwin, *The Mark of A Man: Peter Spencer and the African Union Methodist Tradition* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), p. 15.

activities at a time when public meetings of Blacks were forbidden in the South and even preaching was prohibited except under White supervision.

We can speak of these Northern church leaders, therefore, as elevationists in the sense that their concerns went beyond mere survival. Although a physician and journalist, Martin R. Delany, of Pittsburgh, is a good example of the elevationist orientation. For Delany education, self-help, a desire for equality and racial advancement were ladders of Black elevation and "the means by which God intended man to succeed."

> If, as before stated, a knowledge of all the various business enterprises, trades, professions, and sciences, is necessary for the elevation of the white, a knowledge of them also is necessary for the elevation of the colored man . . . What we desire to learn now is, how to effect a remedy; this we have endeavored to point out. Our elevation must be the result of self-efforts, and work of our own hands. No other human power can accomplish it.[12]

The concept of elevation appears by name in Black literature throughout the nineteenth century. Black men and women, clergy and lay, envisioned a broad horizon of racial uplift or advancement through religion.[13] They were those who dominated the free Black communities of the North and led such causes as the boycotting of goods produced by slave labor, resistance to efforts of the American Colonization Society to return them to Africa, and

---

[12] Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press), 1993; first published in 1852), pp. 44-45.

[13] Delores Williams combines the survival and elevation motifs into a dyadic emphasis which she terms "the survival/quality-of-life tradition." This she concludes, is a female-centered tradition originally appropriated from the Bible and emphasizing God's positive response to the Black family rather than capitulation to the degrading, hopeless conditions of Black existence during and after slavery. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 6.

the promotion of moral reform societies. As the clergy became more distracted by ecclesiastical responsibilities, the secular organizations that they had spawned gradually became autonomous, although still under the parental influence of the larger churches. Such was the case of the American Moral Reform Society and the National Negro Convention movement. The latter first met in a church in 1830 and held seven consecutive annual convocations on elevationist issues. Many of these meetings were attended by liberal Whites to whom they provided an opportunity to continue a fellowship with Blacks (and to exercise subtle control) that had been made more difficult by the development of separate Black churches.

The regional and national conventions devoted to abolition and moral reform also represented the liberation motif that was nurtured by a Black middle class anxious for upward mobility. It soon extricated itself from the direct control of the preachers. Its real impetus was to come from church-related, but intellectually independent laymen and women—from Paul Cuffee, the Massachusetts sea captain, to Maria Stewart, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois. In the antebellum period the themes of liberation and racial elevation were sponsored by relatively wealthy laymen like James Forten, Robert Purvis, William Whipper, and William C. Nell. The most influential among them was the journalist David Walker, whose incendiary *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* in 1829, inspired former slaves like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, and "free born" propagandists like Martin R. Delany, William H. Day, and H. Ford Douglass.[14]

A Comparison of Motifs

There is, obviously, an intricate and dialectical relation-

[14] See Henry Highland Garnet, *Walker's Appeal, With a Brief Sketch of His Life* (New York: J. H. Tobitt Co., 1848); Herbert Aptheker, *"One Continual Cry," David Walker's Appeal* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965).

ship between the survival, liberation, and elevation traditions in the Black community. All three were seminal in the churches of the nineteenth century and continued into the next century in various configurations and degrees of tension, depending upon the situation that existed in different geographical areas. In the ghetto of Los Angeles, between 1906 and the First World War, the survival oriented followers of William J. Seymour and other charismatic evangelists produced an unprecedented display of African religious retentions that had lain dormant for a hundred years in the interstices of Black rural society. Thus a Black Pentecostalism was born that had been nurtured in the "Invisible Institution," but almost extinguished by the middle class Negro churches and the White missionaries who came South with the Union Army. Holiness or Pentecostalism claimed 34 percent of the Black churches in New York City in the mid-1920s. In twelve other Northern cities in 1930, 37 percent of the churches were storefront missions that fostered a volatile combination of survival and liberation hermeneutics. During and after the First World War this distinctive strain of lower class religion, derided and repudiated by the elevation oriented churches of the established middle classes, was radicalized, and in the white-hot, purifying fires of its African-like forge metamorphosed into various religio-political sects and cults, including Blackenized versions of Judaism and Islam.

Between the First and Second World Wars it was necessary to realign the survival, elevation, and liberation motifs so as to create the kind of balance and harmony between them that would conduce to racial advancement. It was the experience of Black leadership during the era of abolitionism and emigrationism that when one of these themes is either neglected or exaggerated above the other two, the result is that commitment to the biblical God and to a militant Church, on one hand, and Black political, economic, and cultural life on the other hand, fall apart. The center collapses and chaos reigns. That happened during Reconstruction and again dur-

ing the Great Depression. On both occasions the consequence was a kind of racial schizophrenia that left the masses in moral confusion and the middle classes in a spiritual malaise that was powerless to give the leadership necessary for realignment and a new beginning when relative calm and prosperity returned.

Beginning in 1955, it was the genius of Martin Luther King, Jr., that brought the three motifs or traditions together again in a prophetic ministry that wedded the deep spirituality and will to survive of the alienated and impoverished masses, with the sophisticated pragmatism and will to achieve equality and liberation that characterized the parvenu urbanites and the Negro intelligentsia—the "New Negro" of the Harlem Renaissance. King embraced all three of these tendencies and created a multi-dimensional movement, inseparable from the Black Church, that set in motion social, political, economic, religious, and cultural forces that have not yet run their full course. Martin King stands, therefore, at the pinnacle of Black religious and political development in the twentieth century. He was not alone in pointing the way to a new future, for the Black Muslim minister, Malcolm X, forced a decisive break between moderate accommodationism that compromised the liberation ideal and a form of protest that was truly revolutionary, that ultimately radicalized King. But in King was the confluence of all the complex and variegated tendencies and orientations that are summed up in the three motifs of survival, liberation, and elevation. Other leaders were to come out of the sacred ground upon which he stood, yet beyond him lay unexplored heights that could not have been seen without standing on his shoulders.

The publication in 1969 of James H. Cone's thunderous challenge to Euro-American theological scholarship, *Black Theology and Black Power*,[15] made room for an alternative strategy for the Black Church and an intrusive new tenant in the halls of

---

[15] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

academe. This method of theologizing had not been altogether absent during the years before King, but had sulked in the shadows outside the mainstream Black churches and the ivy-covered walls of their schools and colleges. Cone's first book gave a name to this neglected and ignored stream of African American religious thought that probably came into existence when the first slave tossed all night on his straw mat, wondering why he should be expected to believe in a God who ordained all Blacks to perpetual bondage. The name given by Cone to what he found pulsating just beneath the surface of King's more conciliatory Social Gospel was "Black liberation theology." The religious first cousin to the Black Power philosophy enunciated and popularized by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton.[16]

Before the end of the 1960s the liberation theme had once again regained ascendancy and proliferated far beyond the Black ghettoes of the United States. Liberation theology took root among oppressed campesinos and barrio-dwellers in Latin America, among Black Christians in South Africa, White feminists and Black womanists in the United States. It rapidly became a major topic among theologians on both sides of the Atlantic and in such ecumenical circles as the World Council of Churches. But the discussion was not limited to seminaries and church councils. A small but belligerent movement for Black religious power and social transformation broke out under the aegis of a new coalition of African American church executives, pastors, and academics that called itself the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC)—a Northern version of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The watchword in important segments of the African American religious community was liberation—freedom from racism, poverty, powerlessness, and every form of White domina-

---

16 See, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V, Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967).

tion. Liberation became a theological code word for the indigenous religious genius of the oppressed masses. On their part, African American theologians, freed from dependence upon priestcraft and deference to ecclesiastical authority, even within the Black Church, began to teach and write a revolutionary Christianity that began with Jesus, whom they called the Black Messiah. Jesus was the Oppressed Man of God who challenged the hypocrisy of Jewish religion, recapitulated in White Christianity and the corruptions of Negro religion, and the unjust power of the Roman state, recapitulated in the world-wide political and economic hegemony of American capitalism at the end of the twentieth century.

Facing the Present Crisis

Throughout their history African American churches have struggled to hold racial advancement on the political, economic, and cultural front and evangelism in a precarious balance. This enabled them to do three things: first to help the race survive, i.e., to hold body and soul together against the atrocities of White racism; secondly, to help the race free itself from legal slavery, economic exploitation, and the curse of second class citizenship; and thirdly, to elevate the young and the masses to a level of moral and spiritual integrity that ennobled individual lives and the collective life of the Black community. Today that community is in crisis partly because material interests—the desire for money and pleasure—has overridden the values of the Civil Rights era which opened up new opportunities for the Black middle class, and partly because the Black Church, seduced by evangelical conservatism, emotionalism, and ecclesiasticism, has lost the balance between the basic characteristics of Black religion—survival, liberation, and elevation. The disequilibrium of these motifs meant the loss of its true external mission and gift to American society, and at the same time, the loss of control over and the trivialization of its internal mission to itself

and Black culture. In consequence, the holistic character of Black religion was fractured after King and Malcolm, and both the Black Church and Black culture, previously inseparable, lost that essential connection. Today they find themselves, in the first instance, in the throes of a crisis of faith; and in the second instance, in the grip of a crisis of meaning.

These crises cannot be solved, however, by "the classes and masses" repudiating religion, or old men pretending that a transient youth culture which glorifies volatility, disregard for serious commitments, and calls Black women whores and bitches, is authentic African American culture.[17] To undermine Black religion by alleging its mystification, and to trivialize African American culture by denying its historic linkage to the Black Church—is only to deepen the crisis, not get rid of it. Authentic Black faith has nothing to do with the dogmatic posturings of Black preachers who ape White televangelists, anymore than Hip Hop and New Jack City have to do with the rich vein of folk wisdom, African religious retentions, and African American intellectual traditions—from David Walker to Toni Morrison—or represent Black culture. Perhaps the time has come to reassert the great tradition we have been examining; to insert values that are truly Afrocentric; to rescue the inheritance of Martin and Malcolm—the strategies of survival, liberation, and elevation—from moral and spiritual debasement by children who never knew them and whom, shamefully, were never taught the truth about who they are and whence they came into this sorry plight.

This, I take it, is one of the goals of Black theology. If the Church will return to basics and tap once again into that ennobling and enlightened religion that brought Blacks through the Civil Rights period and helped them amass a modicum of Black Power, perhaps the crisis of these closing years of the twentieth century will

[17] See, Jawanza Kunjufu, *Hip-Hop vs. Maat: A Psycho/Social Analysis of Values* (Chicago: African American Images, 1993).

be surmounted and they can go into the next one with integrity and hope. Martin King anticipated this possibility. Indeed, it was a part of his dream—an embracing of enduring values, a profoundly religious reorientation, a rejuvenation of the spirit of Blackness. This may well be what he was talking about when, at the end of his last book, he wrote these words:

> This is our challenge. If we will dare to meet it honestly, historians in future years will have to say that there lived a great people—a Black people—who bore their burdens of oppression in the heat of many days and who, through tenacity and creative commitment, injected a new meaning into the veins of American life.[18]

---

[18] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 134.