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The Black Church As An Afrocentric Institution

Introduction

The Black Church in America continues to occupy a place of centrality and influence in African American communities. Proponents and detractors alike agree that it is epochal, spanning the long period of the beginning of North American slavery to the present time. While there is little doubt about its influence in shaping the African American community, honest critics admit that both psychological wellness and dysfunction have co-existed in this one institution. Little has changed since 1933, when Carter Woodson wrote of the Black Church's valuable contribution to the "Negro race," its unrealized potential, its divisiveness, its Black-on-Black exploitation, and its control by Whites (Woodson, 1969). The Black Church continues to be an ambivalent institution, uncertain of its relationship or mission to African Americans in the latter 20th century.

The Black Church as an Afrocentric institution is posited as the prototypical model which will endure because of its relevance to Black culture and realities which define the lives of African Americans. While the amount of pathology and dysfunction varies from church to church and, therefore, cannot be quantified, we state as axiomatic that the degree to which a Black church is removed from the culture and realities of African Americans is the same degree by which it impacts negatively upon the mental health of its members.

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Our analysis of the Black Church as an Afrocentric institution will be made by first describing the Afrocentric Church and then comparing it to three descriptive categories which describe today's Black Church. They are: the "Mystic" or "Other Worldly Church"; the "Social Club" or "Middle-Class Isolated Church"; and the "Social Service Church."

The Black Church: Foundations and Issues

The origins of the Black Church are well-documented by accounts of exslaves. They attest to its potent influence as an "invisible institution" during slavery (Raboteau, 1978), (Rawick, 1972). The invisible church was a mechanism for social cohesion which gave slaves circumscribed control over the deleterious assaults of slavery upon their psyches. It provided a basis for formulating alternative definitions of self that helped obviate an ideology of "Black inferiority" which underlay the slaves' existences. It kept alive hope for a different future. It led to proactive steps to usher in that different future, the reality of liberation. And, it provided a means whereby slaves were able to come into true knowledge of God and the Bible. A knowledge different from the gospel of docility and inferiority taught by southern planters. The resources of the "Invisible Slave Church" facilitated formulation of a cosmology which was enhancing to the mental health of slaves. Wimberly (1986: 55) speaks of the total conversion experience of slaves as facilitating their personality integration. He states:

Personality integration meant having a new center for the self; it also meant living a life that was congruent with that new center. In other words, personality integration referred to reorganizing one's life in behavioral and ethical ways congruent with the conversion experience. Personality integration

meant turning from the life of self-service to a life centered on God and to other's service. Personality integration meant full participation in the community, serving others as a response to God's encountering the person. In other words, the conversion encounter contributed to holistic growth—growth toward self, others, God, and participation in community.

The Black Church was founded on the basis of protest. It was protestation against the false epistemology and false cosmology of Whites regarding the place and person of Black folk in the world. It was the slaves' active effort to structure within a physically and psychologically harmful society a protective cocoon which would be nutritive to social and mental health. There was within the "Invisible Church" an essential link between the theology and praxis of the community and the social realities its members faced.

The theology of slaves in the early Black Church was based on an essential and dynamic relationship between the transcendence of God and the immanence of God. Wimberly (1986: 95) calls these aspects of God "two interpenetrating" realities around which slaves' religious life was organized. He goes on to say:

This (spiritual) world was not divorced from or antagonistic to the material world in a dualistic sense. Rather, the spiritual world transcended that material world and influenced life's processes and gave meaning and significance to them. The transcendent, spiritual realm opened up the awareness of the new life and wholeness that could not be envisaged while one confined one's life to the sensate and materialistic.

Accentuating the idiosyncratic basis for Black religion, Lewter and Mitchell (1986) point out that White western religion is based on

rational apologetics in response to intellectual challenges; by contrast, "the religion of Africa and Black America was shaped by the struggle to survive in a meaningful way." While the current analysis is limited to the state of the Black Church in America, the survival issues are much the same for the African Church. Both the American and African Churches are affected by a Eurocentric ideology which manifested itself in African colonialism and American institutional racism (Tutu, 1975). Institutional racism is a manifestation of a pernicious Eurocentric cosmology that leaves no room for other cosmologies. By its very nature, White western culture seeks to co-opt, or bastardize, or eliminate any cosmological framework which would depose it. It is within this ideological context that the Black Church exists. There is spiritual warfare that seeks to destroy the hearts and minds of African Americans within the very institution which they claim to be fully theirs. Only as the Black Church becomes Afrocentric will it be strong against the external threats to its well-being and effectiveness.

Definitional Basis

It is quite possible that the Afrocentric Church has yet to move past the conceptualization stage. If such churches exist, there are not many. The term "Afrocentric Church" represents precipitation of a new direction of thinking for the author, growing out of the discipline of Africology (Asante, 1987, 1989). Africology is that discipline which studies any and all phenomena in light of its relevance for Black people in the world. Thus, it is inclusive of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. Africology is philosophical, phenomenological, and praxis-oriented, examining both what is and what ought to be (Asante, 1988). The "summum bonum" of the Africological enterprise is "Afrocentricity," which describes its mission and its ideological and analytical approach. Afrocentricity is the African American's

consciousness of self and the African community at the center of history as it unfolds. Asante (1987: 6) says that Afrocentricity "is us centered in our own reality based on our history, our mythology, our creative motif, and our ethos exemplifying our collective will."

Afrocentricity leads to acceptance or creation of only those things which enhance and nurture the African community. It is not rejection of the validity of other perspectives, but acceptance of our perspective as the only workable cosmological approach to life for African people. Unlike a Eurocentric perspective, it does not impose itself as a universal perspective which denies the validity of other perspectives. Rather, it demands respect as valid for African Americans, even as it respects other perspectives as valid for those whose ethnic expressions they encompass.

Afrocentricity offers a level of psychological well-being which most African Americans have yet to attain, especially given the fact that it has yet to become a broad-based orientation of the African American community. Asante's assessment of the "non-Afrocentric" nature of the current social expanse is appropriate here:

The psychology of the African without Afrocentricity has become a matter of great concern. Instead of looking out from one's own center, the non-Afrocentric person operates in a manner that is negatively predictable. The person's images, symbols, life-styles, and manners are contradictory and thereby destructive to personal and collective growth and development. (1987:1)

The Black Church, as a primary institution in Black communities, must become a place which reinforces psychological wholeness. In order to achieve such, it must become Afrocentric.

Conflicting Frameworks?

There is some divergency of opinion about whether or not a Christian Church can be Afrocentric. Does a religion of ancient Jewish origins have relevancy for African Americans? How does God, or Jehovah as he is called in the Jewish tradition, fit into an African perspective? Is there room at one's center for both the God of the Christians and Afrocentricity? These are indeed critical questions with which peace must be made before one can conceptualize the Black Church as becoming Afrocentric! It is the author's belief that the ideal of an Afrocentric Christian church is not enigmatic but can be synthesized. First, it is believed that the basis on which Africans know God in traditional African religion is that He is the same God of Christianity (Muzorewa, 1985). There are also theologians who speak of "Africanizing Christianity" (Chapman, 1978) (Taryor, 1984). For these, it is the transcendent God who is incarnate in African culture.

Secondly, if the church is "only secondarily a theological institution" and "primarily a social institution concerned more with fellowship than with dogma" as stated in Asante's view (1987: 75), then Afrocentricity can be seen as having time order preeminence over Christianity in the social development of persons. This is based on the fact that relationships are the precursors to a person's socialization into a group's system of beliefs and values. In the final analysis, it is the relational aspects of one's life, and one's worldview and lifeview that precede a self-conscious relationship with God. Afrocentricity has the potential for becoming the ideological framework within which one discovers God. Once God becomes personal to an African American, it does not mean elimination of the Afrocentric orientation, but Afrocentricity continues to serve as the framework through which God works in the life of the individual. Afrocentricity becomes the cultural framework within which the immanence of God is mani-

fested.

Finally, a synthesis can be made if one assumes a metaphysical framework containing both "objective truth" and "subjective truth." Objective truth is truth known to humans, regardless of ethnicity and culture. It serves as the common denominator of divergent ideological schema. Subjective truth, on the other hand, is knowable only as one shares a particular cultural orientation. It is rooted within specific ideological constructions. Objective truth is revelation from God and can be known by all humans, regardless of their cultural orientation; this is transcendent truth. By contrast, subjective truth is rooted in a cultural ethos which forms the basis for one's cosmology. This is immanent truth (Johnson, 1988). Azibu (1988: 197) makes the point well (albeit in a different context): "Even though God or the Divine is universal, all theologies represented by humans will have an inherent, particular centrality. This profound point should be axiomatic."

Both objective and subjective truth are from God and both are essentially and necessarily related to the other. The following quotation helps to further our understanding of the relationship between the two:

Too many Black Christians have subscribed to subjective truth found in white cultic Christianity. This genre of subjective truth is revealed as deception when related to the objective truth of God from the Bible, and when related to our own Afrocentric center. (Johnson, 1988)

Many of the slaves were not seduced by "White cultic Christianity" but were able to accept Christianity, yet reject a "White gospel" of Black inferiority. The slave community was able to use God-given subjective truth through the power of the Holy Spirit to come to an understanding of true biblical Christianity.

Detractors notwithstanding, there appears to be ample basis for an Afrocentric Christian Church. We will now examine this Afrocentric Church.

The Afrocentric Church

The strength of the Afrocentric Church lies in its dynamic understanding of, and identification with, theological transcendence and immanence. The Afrocentric Church recognizes an essential and necessary relationship between theological transcendence and immanence. We speak here of transcendence and immanence as inclusive concepts, encompassing both cognition and behavioral manifestations growing out of cognition.

Who is God, apart from and removed from human experience? With the limitations of human language, we answer that "He is He of Whom there is none greater." He is the uncaused Creator whose attributes and personality are as they are, apart from and before human conception in time. The grounds for His existence lie totally within Himself. He is the standard of righteousness, goodness, morality, and love. What we know of God is known only as He enters human experience. There is no separation of who God is within human experience from who he is outside of human experience.

The Afrocentric approach to this objective truth is to view reality as both spiritual and material (Myers, 1985). (We speak of transcendence and immanence as separate concepts only for purposes of comprehension and analysis.) The unity of transcendence and immanence makes possible a holistic conception of self in relation to the universe. It relates the human self to the harmony and rhythm of creation, rather than isolating and fragmenting the psyche. One is able, therefore, to celebrate one's giftedness and uniqueness in relation to all others. Yet, not for self-serving purposes, but for service to

others.

The Afrocentric metaphysical framework is not a sensual one. It emphasizes the person's unity with God. As oneness with God is achieved, one does not rely on the five senses to define reality or happiness. Rather, one is able to transcend the finite and temporal (Myers, 1981). The ends toward which persons live, and the direction of their human efforts, become greater than just the material world. One actively seeks to be like the Lord, but on earth, within social interactions and transactions.

The immanence of God is the involvement of God in human affairs. It is the manifestation of God in social interaction. God's immanence makes possible victorious living. (By "victorious living" is meant the right relationship with God, self, and others.) Immanence within Afrocentricity is energy for reconstruction, creating, and transforming reality. Its imperatives call for changes in values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Asante, 1987). For the church, such behavioral change is called "revival." The initial task of the Afrocentric church is to usher in revival so that its congregants achieve the highest levels of abundant living which are inclusive of spiritual, mental, and social well-being. Given its positioning, it is appropriate that the Black Church have a key role in the transformation of the Black community. Stipe (1973) indicates that religion is a common process of "revitalization" of cultures which have been cast into disarray by the destructive practices of westerners. The challenge for the Afrocentric church is to redeem that which is stolen or damaged by the practices of Whites. Transformation through revival will be total, revolutionary, and will be accomplished by the Spirit of God through the actions of humans.

What are the specific characteristics of such a revival? It will be the interposition of a "humanistic strategy," such as suggested by Rhett Jones (1980) in relation to the behavioral sciences. Such an interposition will mean the legitimatization of the humanity of Black folk

within their own religious perspective. But even more, it will be the enduring and efficacious relevance of the church to the "evolving nature of Black personalities" in relation to their social and political position in the United States.

A humanistic strategy necessarily incorporates the social realities of the group as a basis for action. The relationship of persons with God is not structured around an idealized or composite self. Rather, the grounds for true God-consciousness and salvation, righteousness, and service are based upon realities of human need. Thus, we agree with the Afrocentric concern that "if God is to be your God, He must speak in your own language." (Asante, 1987) It is the removal of all pretentiousness. It is the movement toward the self, accepted of God. Or, in the words of Carroll Saussy (1988: 136): "We can't come close to God in prayer without coming closer to ourselves as known by God."

Individual self-consciousness leads to collective self-consciousness. It is a process of "reflexivity" ("the capacity for role-taking, reflection, and critical self-consciousness") by which the group is able to become an "intentional community." (Smith, 1982) Hence, there is the collective awareness of social need and the will to change it.

A biblically consistent theology, however, recognizes that human intentionality must be consistent with service or worship as God ordains it. The worship of the revived Black Church, now become Afrocentric, is based upon the realities of Black life and is reflected in worship that is emotive with outrage for social injustice. (Rodgers, 1972) The corpus of the prophetic message of the Bible was outrage regarding social injustice. God hates sin! The criteria for acceptability of biblical worship is eradication of social injustice (Micah, chp. 6). Is it not, therefore, appropriate that the Afrocentric Church should be oriented around hatred of social injustice and oppression, whether it be our own unrighteousness or that of others?

But, if the Afrocentric Church is oriented to hatred of sin, there

must also be concern for redemption. Hatred is the emotion, and redemption becomes the non-destructive channeling of behavior based upon that emotion. Rodgers (1972: 64) states that: "outrage is grounded in and nurtured by a wounded primordial sense of dignity, a necessary ingredient of redemptive love." The Afrocentric Church is redemptive in its efforts to change reality by eradicating social injustice and oppression. It is redemptive by its efforts to transform African Americans from radical self hate and passivity, to celebrating that which God has made them. Redemption becomes the manifestation of the Kingdom of God through praxis. Rodgers articulates very well the idea here:

Authentic suffering is celebration. It is the transcendent at work in human experience of surviving the threat of non-being. Where battle is waged to preserve the dignity of man, religion is found . . . If God is at work at this time . . . his agents are those who storm the citadel of oppressors—who walk in the valley of the shadow of death knowing full well that evil is there crushing the body, fearful of the spirit which celebrates the eternal ingredient which commands the life of believers (1972:63-64).

Revival leads to recalling God's workings in the past as crucial to understanding the future. This necessarily means the strengthening of community by rediscovering the ancestors and the evidence of God's grace in them (Muzorewa, 1985). It means discovery of the myths and the symbols that traditionally mediated beliefs and values which maximized the traditional survival capacities of the African American community, gave continuity, lent in formulation of a cosmology, and taught subjective truths of God within the Black cultural frame (Wimberly, 1985).

The complementarity between immanence and transcendence in the Afrocentric Church makes possible a level of psychosocial growth and psychological wholeness which furthers positive development and the goals of the African American community. People who know their reality, who find acceptance and a sense of belonging, and who are able to exercise some power and control over their own histories—these are people whose potential for mental wellness is the greatest. Using the Afrocentric Church as a model which maximizes mental well-being, we conclude by examining three categories of Black churches. Readers are urged to remember that, while these categories are not caricatures, they are generalized types based on the author's experience with the Black Church.

The "Mystic" or "Other Worldly Church"

The psychological crisis in the "Mystic" or "Other Worldly Church" is in relation to a non-existent orientation towards immanence. The metaphysical frame of reference is limited, focusing primarily on other worldly things: life after death, judgment, and final rewards. All are biblical but do not, by themselves, establish the parameters of Christian religion. There is, within this type of church, a profound disinterest in and disconnectedness from social realities. Often, the boundaries are rigid and leadership styles authoritarian. Lacking self-consciousness and collective consciousness in relation to social realities, congregants are held together, not by celebration of who they are or victorious living, but by a type of social asceticism which necessarily must deny cultural and social realities. Biblical doctrine is selective at best and incomplete at worst.

Lacking a doctrine of immanence, the "Mystic Church" has no way for cultural rage to be expressed constructively. Rather, it is turned inward into a kind of hatred of life. Communal intentionality is not

possible because collective "reflexivity" cannot be achieved. Hence, personalities cannot integrate around social realities. Nor can there be a sense of control over one's environment.

The other worldliness of the "Mystic Church" is a normative human behavioral response to separation from God. There is something within each of us that seeks to unite with the Divine (Myers, 1981). The "Mystic Church," however, misses the truth of a person's union with God—that such a union is realized through one's involvement with life. Falling to unite with the Divine, congregants of this church never achieve the vital rhythm which makes social connectiveness possible (Akabar, 1979). Thus, they experience ongoing crises in achieving community with their African American brothers and sisters.

Because God is absent from the world in which these congregants live, their impotence in life increases victimization by Eurocentric practices—specifically institutional racism. Nor is their church willing or prepared to deal with external threats to well-being. Rather, such threats are sublimated to issues of judgment in the hereafter. In the final analysis, the God of this church is inferior because he is limited in his ability to act within human history. The legacy of this church is existential absurdity which is destructive to the social, mental, and spiritual well-being of its people.

The "Social Club" or "Middle-Class Isolated Church"

In the "Mystic Church," the psychological crisis was one of over-identification with transcendence to the exclusion of identification with the immanence of God. In the "Social Club Church" the psychological crisis clusters around an under-identification with both God's transcendence and immanence.

The "Social Club Church" serves primarily as mechanism for rein-

forcement of the congregants' lately achieved middle-class status. Hence, the church is primarily oriented to the sensate area. Symbols to reinforce members' uncertainty about their upward mobility become extremely important. In fact, the church itself serves as a symbol of upwardly mobile status. Overemphasis is placed upon the physical plant, expensive accoutrements, proper liturgies, and the attire of congregants. Either intentionally or by default, members of the "Social Club Church" are isolated from their African American brothers and sisters who are poorer or less educated, etc. If the Social Club Church is urban-based, it is not unusual to find that no one from the surrounding community attends the church. The overarching goal of the "Social Club Church" is a search for existential security.

However, there is an unconscious awareness that the comforts of middle class status are tenuous for Blacks in the current oppressive social context. Myers (1981:17) states that "When self-identity is founded on these external criteria (material things), identity is in constant flux and under continual threat."

Since "Social Club Church" members are unable to achieve homeostasis regarding self-identity, an ongoing epistemological crisis is precipitated. This is based on the truth that the foundation for all knowledge is self-knowledge (Myers, 1985). The biblical aphorism that humans "see through a glass darkly" indicates that knowing is always inconclusive because of human limitations. But, for "Social Club Church" members, there is obliteration of that which could be known. The symbols and myths handed down from the ancestors are considered degrading, so are deliberately set aside. Also, the Bible, having only symbolic significance, does not serve as a guide for ethical behavior. Thus traditions, survival strategies, and codes of conduct become lost to young people and children in such a church. This in turn causes a crisis in community and morality.

Since moral and ethical imperatives are lost with the myths and

symbols, ethical behavioral concerns are detached from the worship and doctrines of the church. There is, therefore, an underdevelopment of appreciation for the person and work of God. Lacking a vision of God's transcendence, there is a superficial orientation to ethical living. The standard becomes morality for the sake of appearance. That is, morality as a symbol of the person's social status. This leads to a genre of Christianity which has form but lacks content for Godly living.

Inferiority in one's subscription to God's transcendence leads to an inferior form of immanence. The relationships within the church tend to be secondary or of an aggregate nature, based primarily in a Eurocentric middle class ethos of competition. Church members are therefore isolated from each other. As in the "Mystic Church," the "Social Club Church" is unable to arrive at a point of collective intentionality. Given the crisis in epistemology and in communal relationships, church members are imprisoned within oppressive social realities. Without an awareness of past history and an action base for shaping their own realities, they fail to achieve the "reflexivity" necessary for empowerment. They are unable, and possibly unwilling, to serve as the Lord's agents in the elimination of social injustice and oppression.

In the final analysis, the tragedy of the "Social Club Church" is that the conversion experience is but mere membership in an organization. Unlike the conversion experiences of their slave mothers and fathers, psychological processes are not liberated because of self-knowledge and communal connectiveness. Therefore, life cycle transitions in the oppressive social environment become disproportionately problematic, without proper theological and social resources to meet needs (Wimberly, 1986). Under the banner of religion, the "Social Club Church" reinforces the spiritual and social dysfunction of its congregants.

The Social Service Church

The "Social Service Church" is found at the opposite end of the continuum from the "Mystic Church." Its psychological crisis lies in over-identification with theological immanence to the exclusion of transcendence. Thus, an ontological and cosmological crisis is precipitated.

The "Social Service Church," more than willing to confront social reality, is extremely aware of social injustice, and is actively involved in efforts to eliminate oppression and empower people. The church's work is often considered outstanding and, without doubt, needed. The problem is a subtle one having to do with the question, "To what end and for whose benefit is the crusading spirit of this church?" This is a question which cannot be answered satisfactorily within the "Social Service Church."

Lacking a doctrine of theological transcendence, there is a serious disjunction between who God is and God's relationship to the "Social Service Church." The stated rationale may be "service to God by service to people," but there is no emotive connection to God in the giving of service. The *raison d'être* always becomes the next program and the next cause. Such a stance is not consistent with Christian theology. The ageless question, "What is the true end of humanity?", is answered by the Christian, "To glorify God." The axiom that Jesus Christ gave was "seeking the Kingdom of God first leads to all other things secondarily" (Matt. 5).

Hence, the center for the "Social Service Church" is improper, being programmatic instead of theological. In theological language, this situation is called idolatry. In the matter of idolatrous centers, Wimberly (1986:61) has this to say:

Improper centers become idolatrous norms around which the person evaluated his other self-worth, relationships with others, and religious life. Idolatrous centers blocked holistic growth and therefore had to die before the true center of the self, God, took its place.

In contrast to the "Social Service Church," the slave ancestors were committed to changing their physical world. But the metaphysical framework out of which they functioned was based on an assumption of transcendence—the spiritual world—and their task was to let this spiritual world impact their lives (Wimberly, 68). Herein is reflected ontological certitude.

Under-identification with transcendence in the "Social Service Church" leads to its cosmological crisis. Given a world and life view without strong theological grounding and without the requirement that humans stretch beyond themselves and palpable life to reach for the transcendent, there can be no vision and no real anticipation of a more utopian existence. The rationale for the "Social Service Church's" existence is a "reactive problem-solving one which does not give attention to the individual growth and development of its members." William L. Banks in his critique of the "Social Service Church" (which he calls the "social gospel") says:

We have seen the effects of the social gospel emphasis; we have seen its fruits. And we don't like what we see: the dried-up spirits; the lack of joy in the pursuit of nothingness (material goods); the bitterness, the disappointment, even in success; the need for a continuous shot in the arm to keep up flagging spirits and jaded souls! (1972:99)

Banks' critique comes out of his disapproval of intense church

involvement in social concerns. Our position differs in that we believe social service concern is the proper domain of the church. But, in order to be truly effective, social service must grow out of a theology of transcendence. This lacking, we observe the situation which Banks has described. The "Social Service Church's" separation of transcendence from immanence, or the spiritual from the material, creates a condition in which members' spiritual needs are not met. Where and how do they deal with ultimate questions of life and death, and of good and evil? The nature of this church exacerbates or at best fails to mitigate members' insecurities about who they are in this world. Nor is comfort found in communal life, the kind which allows one to face the ultimate issues of life. The search of the individual for order in the midst of the irrational, for understanding of the universe, and for significance cannot be met by the "Social Service Church" because it does not have a well-developed perspective on the transcendent.

Conclusion

The foregoing material has described the concept of the Afrocentric Black Church. It is the one model which best maximizes the mental health of African Americans and minimizes the tradition of pathology too often found in the church. Given the exploratory nature of this material, a great deal of intensive intellectual work is yet required before an ideological corpus is developed regarding the Afrocentric Church. Even after the Afrocentric Church's ideological foundations are in place, much work of a prescriptive character will be needed to guide the revival process of the Black Church. Questions yet to be answered are: Who will be the leaders of the Afrocentric Church? Where will they receive their training? What kinds of transitional efforts must be made with the masses in the Black Church in order to raise their consciousness regarding need for an Afrocentric revival in

their churches?

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