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Black Theology, Cultural Authentication and African Americans of the United States

I'm a sociologist who studies the cultural behavior of African Americans in the United States. I'm particularly interested in religious organizations and their relationship to the practice and creation of a distinct culture in the U.S. I'm also a practicing Christian who knows no contradiction between the scientific work of her profession and her beliefs. I have worked with the Black Theology Project (BTP) since 1975, served on the Board of Directors since 1981, and was formerly Executive Director of the Project.

The BTP Executive Committee of the Board has selected me to speak on today's topic and specifically instructed that I not apologize about any lack of formal education in what has traditionally been understood as the "morphology of a *system* of theology." Indeed, the life and history of the BTP have consistently raised the question about whether such a "system of theology" is flexible enough or strong enough to withstand the impact of the Holy Spirit as known in the faith and worship tradition of African Americans of the U.S. My instructions are to share with our Christian friends of Cuba what influence this most modern phase of Black theology has had on the on-going struggle for justice by people of African ancestry living in the United States. In this regard, we contend that Black theology's significance to this phase of our history is not confined to issues of "theology," but must be understood as part of a larger social movement that has affected the complete socio-cultural and spiritual reality of African Americans for the last generation.

I chose to call this a "cultural authentication movement" and identify Black theology as the spiritual foundation for it. The prelude to this cultural authentication was African Americans' 20th century conversion from the social stigma attached to being Black into the social valuation that "Black is beautiful." The century has had many civil protests to

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redress the African American community's second-class citizenship, but not until the late 1960's was there sufficient group self-esteem to address and convert the negative stigma attached to being Black into a positive one.

Political struggles and successes associated with the 1954 Supreme Court decision; the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycotts; the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) sit-ins; the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) marches and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act all provided an opportunity and constructive collective identity for most African Americans in the U.S. By 1965, Black individuals and families had begun to find ways to demonstrate their value preference and association with authentic African American heritage: with "soul." The search for manifestations which would testify to one's "soulness" included clothes of African design; natural or "Afro" hair; food of African or African American heritage; learning the Swahili language; pilgrimages to "The Motherland"; studying the art and history of Africa and African America; the creation of almost anything that captured the aesthetic core of Black people: songs, stories, books, poems, etc.

In the 1960s the struggle for civil rights was succeeding and there was great pride in being Black. Everyone searched for cultural roots with which to verify the popular statement that, "Black is beautiful!" Within this search, there were always standards of authenticity. Aretha Franklin stood as an unchallenged delineator of genuine African American culture in the area of music.

The poetess Nikki Giovanni contends that Aretha's music embodies cultural excellence in Rhythm and Blues, but is also a standard by which to judge any musical characteristic claiming to belong to the African American tradition. As Giovanni writes of Aretha:

She is undoubtedly the one person who put everyone on notice.
She revived Johnny Ace and remembered Lil Green.

Aretha sings "I Say a Little Prayer" and Dionne doesn't want to hear it any more.

Aretha sings "Money Won't Change You" but James Brown can't sing "Respect".

The advent of Aretha pulled Ray Charles from Marlboro country and back into the Blues: Made Nancy Wilson try it one more time: Forced Dionne to make a choice; she opted for the movies: and Diana Ross had to get an Afro wig!

Pushed every Black singer into Blackness and Negro entertainers into "Negroness". . .¹

Aretha continues to be held as the standardbearer of cultural authenticity in African American popular music and her creativity served to revi-

¹"Poem For Aretha" in *Recreation*. Chicago: Broadside Press, 1977.

talize cultural expression in music.

It is proposed that as Aretha Franklin has been for African American music and the people of that music, Black theology too has, "Brought Black people from 'Marlboro country' and back into the Blues! Black theology, as Christian theology with particular requirements for form, content, and history, has identified the distinctiveness of African American identity within the very institution created by that identity: the Black Church. Black theology has served to sanction and revitalize an African American cultural life-behavior whose well-spring is the Black Church.

One proof of this is the ever increasing number of predominantly Black congregations belonging to white denominations that are changing their worship practices. These churches are affirming their cultural identity by insisting on worship practices derived from the cultural traditions of African American Christians in the United States.

Black congregations among the Presbyterians, United Methodists, the Episcopalians, Lutherans and other denominations, have been slowly, and not so slowly, incorporating into their prayers, sermons, songs, and other rituals, elements that are directly related to the African American Christian heritage. Among such churches are St. Peter's Lutheran Church of Springfield Gardens, New York; Trinity United Church of Christ of Chicago, Ill.; the Church of the Intercession, Episcopal, of New York City; and Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Oakland, California. The Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches have incorporated many new vestments containing African American sacred images and symbols. Some denominations have literally commissioned and published hymnals of sacred songs derived from the cultural history of African Americans. Often this has meant incorporating musical traditions of Black congregants which are usually not the denomination's musical tradition.

Perhaps the most recent and dramatic example of a Black congregation practicing its culturally authentic worship in spite of the norms of a white ecclesiology is the Black Catholic priest, Father James Stallings. For some years, Fr. Stallings pastored the Black parish of St. Augustine in Washington, D.C.; within the structure of the Roman Catholic Church, but with demonstratively African American cultural worship. In June of 1989 Fr. Stallings publicly declared his intention to organize an independent Black Catholic congregation which would reflect the cultural and religious heritages of African American parishioners. Such practices were seen to be antithetical to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

The content of Black theology, discussions about it, and analyses of its practices have served to revitalize these congregational pursuits of authenticity and to undergird the spiritual integrity of their cultural creations. Indeed, before we can explore the details of culture in the African

American Christian experience, it is necessary to discuss the meaning of "Black theology."

Black Theology is understood as a new articulation of the Christian faith that was created when people of African ancestry merged their traditional spirituality, their understandings of the Christian gospel, and the experiential circumstances of their lives in the U.S. into a distinct set of African American beliefs and practices. These understandings of Christianity have become a new articulation of the message and meaning of the Gospel.

Said another way, Black theology is understood as the filtering of the message of Jesus Christ through the experiences of African American women and men who have resisted their own destruction by the evils of racial injustice and segregation in the United States. Black theology is viewed in the specific sense as related to people of African ancestry, but in the universal sense as related to all who are willing to change their positions of privilege and become one with people least desired by this world.

Black theology does not begin with nor intentionally conform to the rules and standards white European males have imposed as "systematic or classic theology." Unlike that tradition, Black theology does not presume to know what the meaning of the gospel of our Lord should be for all people. By the very fact that it requires seeing and understanding the gospel through the racial injustice and exploitation experiences of women and men of African ancestry, Black theology proposes that theological discourse does not begin with a "system of belief based upon human rationality." Black theology does not purport to have an originating "corpus of doctrinal assumptions" from which it can reason deductively into the lives of people. Rather, it challenges the whole sequence of Western theologizing by reversing its structure.

This is not a peculiar methodological principle for those who use life experiences as a theological base. We are clear that each group of God's children understands its maker within and from the particular socio-historical context of its collective existence, not from some presumed universal, deductive logic derived from Western European males' ideas about truth. We propose that the authentic theologizing of most human beings is done by living with and observing divine activity, organizing our lives to practice our understanding of divine mandates, and finding ways to articulate what we understand through the merging of practice with some theory of divinity.

Black theology has been built upon the socio-historical experiences of people of African descent living in particular situations in the United States. It is rooted in traditional African wisdoms about divine things. Those wisdoms are similar to those found in the Old Testament and amenable to Black survival in an European-derived Christian society.

Black theology consists of core beliefs taken from an African world-view which came to our country in the minds and hearts of Africans transported as slaves to the New World. These core beliefs were fused with Christian Biblical understandings encountered by the Africans and their descendants in the U.S. The experiential and biblical understandings were authenticated by their applicability to the common experience of racism and exploitation in this country.

What ultimately produced a "Black" theology was the sociological reality of enforced deculturation in North America and the white man's insistence that his definitions of Christianity were universal and superior. Also contributing to Black theological resistance was the whites' denial of the spiritual integrity of non-Christians and the possibility of salvation for people of African ancestry, whether or not they were Christian. White Christians constructed a social order—rules, schools, churches—that perpetuated dehumanizing conditions for succeeding generations of African Americans. It would have been almost impossible for Blacks to have accepted uncritically Christianity as European Americans defined, instructed and practiced it in the U.S. To do so would have denied that God created Africa and all the varied peoples of that continent. Not only would such acceptance contradict what Africans had experienced in their homeland, but the deepest meaning of divine revelation in the Old and New Testaments.

As Lawrence Levine writes in his study of Black culture and consciousness:

Slaves simply refused to be uncritical recipients of a religion defined and controlled by white intermediaries and interpreters. No matter how respectfully and attentively they might listen to the white preachers, no matter how well they might sing the traditional hymns, it was their own preachers and their own song that stirred them most.

The ontological perspective and traditional beliefs of Africa offered slaves hope for survival and assurance of group identity as alternatives to the practices and beliefs whites wanted them to embrace in the New World. The core of their African world-view revolved around understanding the universe as essentially imbued with a vitalistic life force; understanding humans as in responsible interdependence with a harmonious cosmos; and understanding that there is an interconnection among all people that produces both oneness and individual uniqueness (Mbiti, 1969; 1970; Shorter, 1972; Boykin, 1983). Although some adjustments had to be made, the message of Christianity did not require slaves to totally abdicate their world-view. Stories of the Old Testament, for example, were stories of faith that were quite compatible with African stories. Both were directly applicable to the lives of an oppressed, enslaved people intent upon survival (Levine, 1977: 81-101). New Testament stories of hope and salvation through Christ, reinforced by the life exper-

iences of slavery and oppression, formed the core of a new understanding of God and of Christianity, a new understanding that constructed the boundaries of a "Black theology."

The new comprehensions of African Americans who adopted Christianity became the substance out of which they composed their prayers, sermons, songs and traditions of behavior in worship. It was a Christian message, but an *African American* Christian message, distinct from Christianity taught and practiced by Europeans. It often resembled, but was actually something quite different from that taught by whites of the same church or denominational tradition. This new, "Black" theology gave sanction and justification for the rejection of slavery and the rebellion against segregated worship. The rejection and rebellion led to the formation of independent Black congregations and denominations where Christian equality was paramount and racial segregation not permitted.

The 1776 organization of the Harrison Street Baptist Church in Petersburg, Virginia; the 1785 formation of the "Negro" Baptist Church at Williamsburg, Virginia; the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia in 1785 and a second Baptist church in that city in 1799; the 1790 African Baptist Church of Lexington, Kentucky; and the organization of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination in 1816 and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1821, are all examples of organizational independence expressed by ante-bellum Black Christians. These congregations and denominations became the identifiable cultural places where distinctively African American theologizing took place. The Black community's articulation of its particular understanding of God was not generally found in written exegeses, homilies, treatises, or sermons. Early African Americans were illiterate people whose cultural heritage favored an oral tradition. Their theologizing, therefore, was done in the prayers, songs, ex tempore sermons, words of praise, and other aspects of the worship event.

Gatherings of African American Christians in worship and social organization evolved to the institutionalized "Black Church" that was the custodian of a distinctive theology and simultaneously the wellspring of cultural creation. The very vehicles through which African Americans expressed their theology were also the vehicles through which their distinct culture was expressed behaviorally. The way they prayed, the patterned stylization of English used for prayer; the songs created, the themes of songs, the words used in the songs; the particular musical style in which songs were sung; the patterned phrases of their sermons, the recurring themes and topics of sermons; the manner in which sermons were delivered; and the patterned way all of these elements were organized in worship—these were content and components of a distinctive culture existing within the boundaries of a European American Christian community.