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The Black Church's Mission of Justice: Political Roles in the Context of Oppression

This paper will review the political roles of the black church, black religion and black religious leaders in the struggle against oppression in the U.S.A. The topic is extensive and this survey necessarily brief; nevertheless, it is hoped that this will provide an introduction to the significance of the black church in African American history.

The context is the political economy of the U.S.A. characterized by multiple systems of domination and subordination: specifically racism, sexism, and class oppression. As such, it provides a framework for the study of black history focusing on questions of power and powerlessness and allows us to assess the impact of the black church on the structures and mechanisms of domination as well as on the efforts of the powerless to resist that domination. For the purpose of illumination, black church history will be divided into four periods, an admittedly risky but useful periodization offered previously by Professor Gayraud Wilmore (unpublished paper presented at the 1984 Martin Luther King, Jr. Seminar in Havana, Cuba) and used here to facilitate a discussion of a few key political roles performed by the black church.

Two further points should be clarified here. The first is to make explicit an assumption in this discussion: that the definition of politics used here goes beyond traditional definitions of politics that examine formal, institutional and constitutionally prescribed behaviors to include those actions which are informal, extra-institutional and may include activities which are supportive of or designed to alter the prevailing political-economic status quo. Thus, the definition of politics used here permits us to consider a broad range of formal and informal activities designed to affect directly or indirectly the distribution of symbolic and material resources in society, thus including activities which are accessible to all,

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* The term *womanist* is preferred by some as more inclusive.

including the powerless.

The second point is, perhaps, obvious in this forum but requires in Euro-American academic and popular circles explicit mention. It is a critical fact that blacks in the U.S.A. — as in all the Americas — have always resisted oppression. Though the intensity and styles of resistance to oppression have been fundamental characteristics of the black experience in the U.S.A., indeed throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.

Our discussion of black church history begins with the period 1753 to 1831, described by Wilmore as the period of “institutional emergence” when blacks, slave and free, sought to establish their own Christian congregations and brought into being — primarily in the North — the independent black church. The political economy of this time was characterized by merchant capitalism in the northern region of the United States that traded abroad the products of slave labor from the plantation system operated primarily in southern states.

Throughout plantation areas, despite debate within the dominant community about the utility of religion as a mechanism of control or of liberation, a majority of slaveowners restricted and constrained religious practice and Christian proselytizing among slaves. As a result, early efforts by slaves to maintain religion and spirituality in their lives resulted in the black church taking the form of the “invisible institution” — clandestine gatherings presided over by itinerant preachers or those among the slaves familiar with the Bible or gifted with the ability to interpret their knowledge of the gospel in ways that gave support and hope to those weary souls.

A few independent, “above ground” congregations were established in this early period. But the most important development in the institutionalization of black religious life occurred with the establishment of independent black denominations, beginning with the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church by Richard Allen in Philadelphia. A number of writers have referred to this challenge to racist white Christianity as the first movement for independence among African Americans in the U.S.A. (Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* and Washington, “Introduction”, *Black Religion and Public Policy*).

What is critical politically in this early period is the interpretation given to Christianity by blacks — slave and free — in the contexts of their religion and their church. James Cone describes the essence of this radical adaptation.

Although African slaves were introduced to Christianity by white preachers and missionaries who told them that it condoned their slavery, most Africans did not accept that part of white religion. Despite the fact that most of them were illiterate, they adapted the “Christianity” that they received from whites to their life situation by reinterpreting the gospel as an affirmation of their identity as human beings and as an

empowerment to fight for the liberation of all blacks. The outstanding achievement of the black church in service to the black community can hardly be overstated.¹

Fundamental to such an interpretation, according to Wilmore, was the heritage of African spirituality which integrated the spirit world with the objective world, located human beings in relation to a larger community, and held freedom — to be and to exist — as indispensable for life and human fulfillment.² Such an ethos informed an understanding of the slaves' context of racial and economic oppression and provided them with a basis for developing a religion which was at once distinct and essentially radical. Thus, black religion became a source of motivation and justification for the struggle for freedom and the black church was imbued with a mission that mandated the inseparable pursuit of salvation and justice. This role, of course, was inherently at odds with the prevailing political and economic order.

The second period of black church history is identified as the era of "Radical Abolitionism and Institutional Expansion" and dates from Bishop Richard Allen's death in 1831 to the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. During this time there was a qualitative change in the slave production system. Induced by the invention of the cotton gin, the exploitation of slave labor intensified and conditions became even harsher for bondsmen and bondswomen while liberty became even more precarious for free blacks. At the same time slave resistance, both overt and covert, spread, and slave rebellions and planned revolts increased both inside and outside of the United States.

During this period, black churches proliferated. In plantation areas, slaveowners permitted the establishment of congregations among their slaves, expecting to use religion to shape a more docile and compliant labor force. In the North and western regions of the nation the black church expanded, with new congregations and new denominations coming into being. In describing the black church of the nineteenth century, Wilmore writes:

By every measure it was an amazing institution. Led for the most part by illiterate preachers, many of whom were slaves or recently freedmen [sic], poverty-stricken and repressed by custom and law, this church converted thousands, stabilized family life, established insurance and burial societies, founded schools and colleges, commissioned missionaries to the far corners of the world, and at the same time agitated for the abolition of slavery, supported illegal actions in behalf of fugitives, organized the Underground Railroad, fomented slave uprisings, promoted the Civil War, developed community political education and action in behalf of civil rights, and provided the social, economic, political and cultural base of the entire black community in the

¹ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 99-100.

² Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Examination of the Black Experience in Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1972), 37.

United States.³

The black church continued to pursue its role as interpreter of the true meaning of democratic concepts and as advocate for freedom and justice. The black church and black religion provided in its understanding of Christianity and its reading of Old Testament stories such as the Exodus impetus and justification for the rebellions of, among others, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Vesey and Turner used explicit religious references to organize followers and to demonstrate to potential rebels that God was a just God whose will was that they be free.⁴ Even on a smaller scale of resistance, black preachers among slave congregations must not be discounted as instigators of discontent and insurrection. The use of spirituals such as "Steal Away", "O Mary, Don' You Weep", "Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho" and "Go Down Moses" was subtle yet pointed exhortation to resistance⁵ which took a variety of forms including escape, sabotage, abortion and birth control, poisoning and feigned dimwittedness.

Northern black churches obviously had more flexibility and offered forums for the advocacy of abolition, published abolitionist materials and nurtured a religious and secular black leadership which worked tirelessly to achieve the freedom of their brothers and sisters. These leaders included David Walker whose "Appeal" pamphlet called for the violent destruction of the slave order, Daniel Coker, Richard Allen, Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and many, many others. The black church, too, spawned a number of nationalists including Martin Delaney, Reverend Henry Highland Garnet, Archbishop Alexander Crummel, and Reverend Edward Wilmot Blyden. Few black leaders of the period, in fact, were not also Christian churchpeople. The politicization or radical nature of black religion was reflected also in the fact that religious work and "race" work were seen as inseparable. Because of this the black church performed a vital political function in developing and nurturing black leadership.⁶

At the point of the Civil War the black church had become African Americans' independent institution with national scope, carrying out several political roles as interpreter of key political principles on behalf of the black community to the nation as a whole, advocate of justice and equality, agent of support and leadership development, and transmitter of culture. The church was an essential and critical institution among blacks because it provided a space for support, identification, affirmation

³ Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 244.

⁴ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

and community as well as an arena from which to wage war against slavery whether on individual terms — such as survival or escape — or as a group undertaking such as revolt.

That such activities constituted a challenge to the racial/class order is clear; it is less obvious, however, that black religion and the black church were prepared to subvert the system of gender subordination. Such a challenge, it can be argued, was indirect, embodied in its interpretation of Christianity and advocacy of freedom as well as support functions which could hardly have been limited to a particular gender. Black women as well as men, though fewer in number, were emerging as leaders in religious and secular life as they would continue to do into the twentieth century — honing essential political skills within the church context, political skills which included public speaking, organizing and leadership capabilities. In addition to the presence of several women among the black religious leaders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, black women were prominent in the cultural, educational and service realms of church activities. Black women were central to the development and use of music which was as much a cultural expression as a political survival tool, transmitting crucial ideas as well as practical messages to slaves and free persons. They also were instrumental in the establishment and maintenance of educational and social services provided by black churches, especially in the antebellum North.⁷

A reading of black history indicates that African Americans shared with the dominant culture notions about gender which valued women differently and, perhaps, less than men. At the same time, however, survival threatened by the disintegrative pressures of the slave system — particularly the fragility of family and community — required women's full participation in the life forged by the slave and free communities of which they were a vital part.⁸ Thus, while black women may have been less visible in the leadership structures of the black church, they were anything but marginal.

The period from 1863 to 1955 has been characterized as one of "deradicalization" of the black church. Several factors contributed to the political retreat of the churches, not least of which was the political and economic milieu for blacks from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War. The hegemony of northern industrial capital was secured during Reconstruction. In this configuration of U.S.A. political economy the southern plantation production system was a junior

⁷ Jualynne E. Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "Something Within: Social Change and Collective Endurance in the Sacred World of Black Christian Women," in *Women and Religion in America, 1900-1968*, vol. 3, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 82-83.

⁸ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 3-29.

partner employing ex-slave labor forced to subsist at marginal levels. Such exploitation of nominally free black workers required a repressive system that incorporated physical coercion, available from white terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, political disfranchisement, a rigid social hierarchy codified by legal restrictions in "jim-crow" laws, and state sanction afforded by the Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which enunciated the doctrine of "separate but equal" treatment of the races.

The weight of this system required substantial adaptation by African Americans and drew on all the resources of the black church to help them adjust and survive. In addition, the massive migration of blacks from the rural South to northern and southern cities placed enormous burdens on the black church to provide social services of almost every kind. These are cited as two factors leading to the deradicalization of the black church. Moreover, the conservative influence of the accommodationist sector of the black community as represented preeminently during this period by Booker T. Washington, the increasing middle class character of black leadership with its assimilationist tendencies, the need to make compromises with the dominant white community, the emergence of parallel secular organizations which undertook similar political and social functions — such as the N.A.A.C.P., National Urban League and the black women's club movement, the National Association of Colored Women — and the "creeping secularization" of the black church add to the complex of factors which brought a withdrawal of the churches from pursuit of their mission of justice and equality (Wilmore, unpublished paper).

Although black religion never ceased interpreting Christian values as consistent with justice, black churches retreated from their advocacy role and cultivated a quiescent and compliant leadership. Many black preachers withdrew into the accommodationist tide, moving closer to white Christianity's convenient image of a self-effacing, patiently suffering Christ. What was retained was the support role of the church which consumed vast amounts of its resources. Support, of course, included ministering to the psychological needs of a community under a vicious racist assault that included the rationalizations of social evolutionary theory to lynchings and race riots. Material support was especially critical in the northern cities as large numbers of blacks migrated and were forced to compete with equally poor immigrants whose advantage in the job market was skin color. The churches sought to provide what the state would not: adequate education, assistance with self-help initiatives and a vast array of social services.

The performance of these functions was, no doubt, critical to the survival of black Americans, itself a form of resistance. But it was a defensive and, perhaps, accommodating stance especially in light of the black

church's heritage of militant offensive against the repressive social and political order. Wilmore writes that

many black ministers retreated to what they knew best—preaching and raising money. With a few exceptions, their churches turned inward to the spiritual needs of a deprived and oppressed people who found emotional release from the victimization of the white world in the ritual and organizational effervescence of Black church life.⁹

There are two other significant aspects of this period of black church history. The first is noted by Jualynne Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes who remind us that the “deradicalization of the black church coincided with a period of militant masculinization and suppression of black women’s leadership roles and of bitter resistance to women’s preaching and public speaking.”¹⁰ A sexual division of labor already had been made in the distinctions between the “gospel labor” of men and that of women; the former referred to as preaching while the same activity undertaken by women was differently valued as mere teaching. That distinction continued to grow, suggesting that the church was retreating also, from that part of its justice mission which mandated an attack upon sexist injustice. Yet, black women continued their fight within denominations to maintain their leadership roles. Frequently, they were able to create a space for that leadership in non-mainline denominations such as the Sanctified Church and the Pentecostal movement.

These last two denominational bodies reflect the other important fact about black church history in the twentieth century — that there were contradictory strains in the deradicalization period reflected primarily in the proliferation of non-mainline churches, cults and sects particularly in northern cities. It has been suggested that not only did the black masses seek opportunities for association, expression and recognition denied them by the dominant society’s segregated institutions, but that their growing membership in these churches reflected a critique of major black denominations by people closest to black folk religion.¹¹ It could be argued that the desire of large numbers of black people to participate in congregations whose stylized rituals were more consistent with black religious tradition and norms embodied a class critique of some mainstream denominations.

The emergence of the leadership of Marcus Garvey and his organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, at about the same time as the proliferation of non-mainline churches — 1920s and 1930s — also punctuates the period of deradicalization. The Garvey Movement was a quasi-religious, nationalist movement that attracted millions of fol-

⁹ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 226.

¹⁰ Dodson and Gilkes, “Something Within,” 103.

¹¹ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 226.

lowers in the U.S.A., Caribbean and Africa. Garvey's exhortations that God was black and that black people were destined for a glorious future in an "Africa for the Africans" was a counterpoint to the Booker T. Washington accommodationists and the middle class leadership of the national civil rights organizations like the N.A.A.C.P. which Garvey so vehemently criticized for their elitism.

The fourth period of black church history beings in 1955 with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and extends to the mid-1970s. Professor Wilmore refers to this period as one of "Black Religious Protest, Cultural Revitalization and Theological Renewal." This phase is distinguished by the renewal of black church leaders' participation in and commitment to the struggle for liberation and justice. Black churches were reminded of their political heritage by the massive political upheaval of that period, efforts to mobilize black people from within churches and, in particular, by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership of that movement. Though the black church as an institution was slow to respond to that call, individual black ministers and church leaders were key members of the Movement's leadership.

In the post-war era, the United States became the hegemonic economic and political power in the world capitalist system. This system was characterized by increasing monopolization, the dominance of transnational corporations at the center and the incorporation of dependent political economies into that system at the periphery. Production levels in the U.S.A. generally were quite high and the nation sought international markets for this production through imperialism and neo-colonialism in the Third World. There appeared to be enough prosperity in the domestic political economy to permit an opening in the racial-social structure just at a time when blacks were mobilizing to demand inclusion in the political and social order. Parallelling the domestic mobilization and infusing it with hope was the anti-colonial movement in Africa.

Inside the black community the Civil Rights Movement was a struggle for political equality using tactics of non-violence and civil disobedience. As such it was distinct from the longstanding heritage of nationalism among African Americans which asserted race pride and its claim to political, social and economic equality with a right to use any means necessary to acquire them. There was a reemergence of nationalism in the 1960s that occurred both within the Civil Rights Movement — via the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality — and outside of that movement, most notably in the Nation of Islam and the teachings of Malcolm X. "Black Power" became the rallying cry of the nationalist movement. Cultural revitalization occurred as well, manifesting itself in renewed interest in Africa and in the culture of the Diaspora as well as in efforts to recapture and re-value aspects of African American history and culture.

All of these had an impact on the black church. Wilmore notes that "it was the groundswell of political activity, ideological reflection and cultural education among the masses of the ghetto induced by the Black Power movement, which provided the incentive for a genuine theological renewal within the Black church."¹² The product of this theological endeavor came to be known as Black Theology, a "systematic exposition of the Christian faith using the black experience as the chief source." While individual black churchmen, women and theologians were involved in the early development of Black Theology, the black church has been slow to embrace it. Their past relationship has been marked by criticism and tentativeness while embodying the potential for providing a very powerful source of strength for the Black liberation movement. Black theology could become the tool through which the black church will rejuvenate and, in fact, transform its role as interpreter of Christian faith.

During this most recent era of black church history there has been a renewal of the black church's political commitment, most notably in the Civil Rights Movement and to a lesser extent in response to calls by nationalist leaders to the churches to involve themselves more directly in the secular, political and social struggles of the black community. Critical of their political retreat, Black Christian nationalist Rev. Albert Cleage, activist James Foreman, politician-activist Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and others challenged the black church to return to a nationalist-oriented motif of black community development, of marshalling their resources in order to renew and strengthen black people's energies in the struggle for justice. In response many congregations undertook that self-conscious work of nation-building which included the establishment of educational and social programs as well as collective enterprise ventures designed to address the needs of the black community. Churches were involved in housing construction, the establishment of alternative schools, youth development programs, cultural activities and the initiation of all manner of social services designed to combat the ravages of racism on black individuals and black families.

In addition, churches — especially in some parts of the rural South where struggles continue to pursue fundamental political rights such as the right to vote unhampered by racist demagoguery — have often become focal points for political initiatives by the black community. They frequently serve as mobilization sites for the campaigns of black candidates for public office. Indeed, without the black church Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 campaigns for president would have been without a crucial platform, organizational arena and support base.

¹² *Ibid.*, 286.

Since the beginning of the 1980s decade, however, many black churches have again retreated from activism. The current political environment and resurgence of religious fundamentalism in the United States pose a very serious threat that could yet snatch many churches away from their reconceptualized mission of justice. Some argue that the black church is becoming increasingly middle class and is alienating, in the process, the masses of black folk. It also is true that the church can no longer afford to ignore or to exclude the potential leadership of black women or the growth that is the potential by-product of black womanist theology's critique.

The black church faces another challenge in developing linkages to Third World peoples struggling for liberation, for equity, and for justice. There is in black church history a legacy of political struggle against some of the same oppressive forces as those faced by Third World peoples which links the struggle of African Americans to those of oppressed people the world over. Black theology holds the potential for forging these relationships and must incorporate black churches in that process.

The political roles carried out by the black church in the past — interpreter, advocate, support, and challenger of the status quo — continue to exist. The current international and domestic political economic environments seem to demand a broader, more self-conscious, more deliberate and certainly a deeper commitment to those roles if the black church is to pursue its mission of justice and liberation in the future.