

JOHN E. BRANDON*

Worship in the Black Experience

This article on "worship in the black experience" is not intended to be exhaustive of the subject, but is an effort to highlight some of its main features and the environment in which this particular worship experience flourishes. Though worship in the black church varies from church to church, it is the common historical experience of a people that has provided the groundwork for a common theological interpretation of that experience. Of course, there are affinities to the experience of others, but affinities are not quite like the full experience.

For many years, worship in the black church has been a subject of joy, curiosity, study and controversy. It has been a source of joy for millions of blacks who have been a part of the church long before it was called "the black church"—those fathers and mothers, grandparents, great grandparents, and so on, who found the black church to be "an oasis in a dry desert," a "balm in Gilead" and a source of strength for the struggle and the fight. For them and many others, it was indeed their joy.

Yet, there have been and still are those who look upon Christian worship in the black experience with great curiosity. It is seen as a spectacle to behold and not an experience to be shared. Much of the study and controversy arises at the point of how much of the African influence still remains in worship in the black experience, over the meaning of this particular "style" of worship, and whether it is a unique experience.

This brief paper will speak to the historical situation, to a theological understanding and to the writer's view of what the present black attitude is toward worship in the black experience, while at the same time attempting to set forth its uniqueness.

A Historical Viewpoint

Let there be no mistake about it, worship in the black experience is *Christian worship*. It is Christian worship informed by an African heritage, the Bible, and a Western understanding of Christianity under the

* Dr. Brandon is President, Payne Theological Seminary, Wilberforce, Ohio. This article originally appeared in *Nexus* (Boston: School of Theology, Boston University, 1979), and is reprinted here, with some slight editorial changes, with permission.

conditions of slavery, all brought together to form a unique way of worship. C. Eric Lincoln says in the foreword of *Black Sects and Cults* by Joseph Washington:

The blacks brought their religion with them. After a time they accepted the white man's religion, but they have not always expressed it in the white man's way. It became the black man's purpose—perhaps it was his destiny—to shape, to fashion, to recreate the religion offered him by the Christian slave master, to remold it nearer to his own heart's desire, nearer to his own peculiar needs. The black religious experience is something more than a black patina on a white happening. It is a unique response to a historical occurrence which can never be replicated for any people in America.¹

On this very point comes the controversy. How much of the African religion was retained by the slaves and how much of "the white man's religion" was accepted, reshaped and remolded into a unique worship experience?

E. Franklin Frazier felt that "the stripping process of slavery" did not permit the transmission of any significant African traditions on the new soil of America. He said, ". . . From the available evidence, including what we know of the manner in which the slaves were Christianized and the character of their churches, it is impossible to establish any continuity between African religious practices and the Negro church in the United States." It is Frazier's belief that "whatever remained of their religious myths and cults had no meaning whatever."²

To some extent, I would agree with Frazier that in order to understand the religion of the slaves, one must study the influence of Christianity. However, as Frazier notes, W. E. B. DuBois felt "the Negro church was the only social institution which started in the African forest and survived slavery."³

A number of historians today believe that significant survivals of the African past, including family life, can be observed in modern day black life.

Andrew Billingsley believes that there is an "African continuum," even though historians and sociologists have said "that all vestiges of African influence were destroyed by the European-American slave system." He goes on to list the names of such historians as John Blassingame, George Rawick and Eugene Genovese, together with Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, who "have provided overwhelming empirical support"⁴ for the fact that the African influence was very much alive.

¹ (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 31.

² E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), p. 2.

³ W. E. B. DuBois, *Some Efforts of the American Negroes for Their Own Betterment* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Publications 1898), p. 32.

⁴ Andrew Billingsley, *The Evolution of the Black Family* (New York: National Urban

Blassingame said of the slaves:

Antebellum black slaves created several unique cultural forms which lightened their burden of oppression, promoted group solidarity, provided ways for verbalizing aggression, sustaining hope, building self-esteem, and often represented areas of life largely free from the control of whites . . . the social organization of the quarters was the slave's primary environment which gave him his ethical rules and fostered cooperation, mutual assistance, and black solidarity.⁵

No matter what was the size of these quarters or communities in Blassingame's statement, it is difficult to imagine them as not having churches or religious societies. The "quarters" provided an insular environment from many of the influences of white society, even though there were definite efforts on the part of slave masters to prevent any resurgence of African traditions.

However, some African traditions were too strong to be discarded in the process of the African's "acculturation to Anglo-Saxon traditions."⁶ And at this point, it is important to list, although briefly, several "significant survivals of the African past" that can be observed in modified form in black worship. Let us begin with "the shout."

After the regular service there frequently was held in the same room a special service, purely African in form and tradition. The most detailed account of this rite in any nineteenth-century source is given in the 1867 collection, but numerous other sources also describe it. The true 'shout' takes place on Sundays or on 'praise' nights through the week, and either in the praise-house or in some cabin in which a regular religious meeting has been held. . . . Generally, the gathering divided itself into groups, shouters (that is, dancers) and singers. Some nineteenth-century writers thought that only Baptists had shouts. The editors of *Slave Songs* thought that the shout was confined to South Carolina and the States south of it.⁷

It is believed that the shout belongs to no one denomination nor to any one region. It simply represents the survival of an African tradition in the New World. This religious performance also belongs to the same tradition as the eighteenth-century "jubilees" the circle dances at camp meetings, and the Methodist praying bands in urban areas, with only a few musical instruments missing.

Next, the traditional ritual dance was one of the most persistent of the African customs that survived in the New World, because "in Africa, the dance was an integral part of religious activity."⁸ An African by the name Equiano, whose slave name was Gustavus Vassa (born in Benin,

League Publication, 1976), p. 9.

⁵ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 41.

⁶ Eileen Southern, "The Music of Black Americans, A History," in *The Black Experience in Religion*, C. Eric Lincoln, ed., (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

West Africa, 1745), noted in his autobiography that every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, with songs and music suited to the occasions.⁹ Further, it is noted that

There are numerous dances, all of which are symbolic, and at every public worship, most, if not all the dances would be performed. The Akan priest is certainly a "dancing priest" . . . and is clearly in evidence on occasions of public worship The period of such public worship may last for a whole day or a whole night; and the purpose is to contribute to the spiritual edification and the renewal of faith of devotees, as well as dedication of converts.¹⁰

Worship in Akan religion is both ritualistic and liturgical. In the case of ritual, it follows a definite pattern that makes for efficacy of the ritual performed The liturgy is embodied in the songs, prayers, and praises sung to the deities and also in the language of the drums.¹¹

With regard to prayers in the black church and the worship experience, there is another striking similarity with African tradition. It is noted in Akan prayers that, "As the officiant prays, the onlookers express aloud their concurrence with, or approval of the contents of the prayers, after each pause by saying '*Ampa ara*' (It is just the truth) or '*Yonn*' (Yes indeed!)."¹²

So, in spite of the efforts on the part of slave masters to prevent any resurgence of African traditions, and even though white Baptist and Methodist preachers and missionaries were quite active in their preaching to the slaves, there is *not* overwhelming evidence that African slaves did *not* remold this new experience according to how they *saw* God and how God spoke to them in their particular situation.

A Theological Expression

This writing deals with more than a style of worship or an order of worship that characterizes "worship in the black experience." It is about an experience—an experience which only recently has been articulated in theological terminology. It is about a theology expressed in worship. The worship experience shows what black people "feel" about God. If worship in the black experience were just a style or an order of worship, it would have passed away long ago. Therefore, we are talking about a kind of worship experience that includes a black theology.

⁹ Quoted in Arna Bontemps, ed., *Great Slave Narratives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 4-7.

¹⁰ Cf. J. H. Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities* (Edinburgh: University of Ghana, 1963). Nketia recorded the music for twelve such dances during his field work for his book.

¹¹ Kofi Asare Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," in *The Black Experience in Religion*, C. Eric Lincoln, ed., (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 290-292.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 292.

Worship in the black religious experience is the visible acting out of what blacks believe about God and the relationship with God. That relationship is with a God who is just and merciful. The National Conference of Black Churchmen, in 1976, stated that ". . . the worship of the Black Church cannot be separated from its life and ethical praxis. It is in the struggle against racism and oppression that the Black Church creates and expresses it in shouts of praise and sounds of struggle for the liberation of the oppressed . . ." ¹³ It stated further in the same passage, that:

Black Theology is ultimately corrected and authenticated by the inseparable life and worship of the Black Church. It is rooted in neither American liberalism, nor conservatism, but in Black spirituality and Black struggle. Its appropriation of the Christian faith and the ethical imperatives of the Gospel is grounded in the revelation of God contained in the inspired preaching, prayer and praise of Black worship informed by the Holy scriptures. It is controlled by the revelation of God in the history of Black people that gives purpose, meaning and transforming power to the Black struggle for humanity and liberation.

At this point, let us establish some common understanding about worship, whether it is in the black experience or not. True worship is always our response to God. It is a response that seeks the presence of God. All aspects of a worship service are directed toward glorifying the greatness of God—lifting up His attributes of love and justice, righteousness and power.

If we were to describe worship, it would be in terms of how we respond to God and what he has done for us. Worship involves many things. It involves confession of sins, petition, adoration and praise, revelation and the total offering of ourselves to God. ¹⁴

This paper is attempting to say that the unique and painful experience of blacks in this country has been a creative one; blacks uprooted from their homeland and encountering strange and different ways, were creative enough to take an unfamiliar religion and worship experience and reshape it to their special needs. This reshaping by no means diluted the true meaning of worship.

John S. Mbiti, a native of Kenya, says that

The notion of God as the Supreme Being is found in all African societies. Knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, songs, prayers, stories, and religious ceremonies and, through these media, passed on from one society to another . . . ¹⁵

"Worship," says William Nicholls, "as most people know is, 'worth-

¹³ *Liberation and Unity, A Lenten Booklet* (Nashville The AME Press, 1976), p. 10.

¹⁴ Cf. Massey H. Shepherd, *The Worship of the Church* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1952).

¹⁵ John S. Mbiti, "The Nature of God" in *The Black Experience in Religion*, C. Eric Lincoln, ed., (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 274.

ship.' To give worship to anyone is to accord them due recognition of their inherent dignity and value, of their worth or worthiness."¹⁶

There is no substantial evidence that the dramatic re-presentation of the great themes of the Christian story as told in the black worship experience are any less potent and powerful. The black church believes that Christian worship is not only of necessity rooted and grounded in history of the Christian event, but in the history of a people—black people who have been “preserved” unto this day. When the merciful history of God’s action in the life of his black people is recounted, the black church responds with penitence and thanksgiving, dedication and praise.

The National Conference of the Black Theology Project stated, “. . . Black Theology is ‘God-talk’ that reflects the black Christian experience of God’s action and our grateful response. Black Theology understands the ‘good news’ as freedom, and Jesus the Christ as the Liberator.”¹⁷

There is a strong and unashamedly stated belief in the black church that real worship cannot be contrived. It must be “led by the spirit.” Many of us will recall that this was even true during the days of the Puritan Movement—those who objected to particular forms of worship because a set form of worship quenched the spirit. However, the uniqueness of worship in the black experience, in this regard, is not so much an objection to a set form of worship. This is clear in the worship of the three predominantly black Methodist churches and the use of ecumenical forms of worship in the Consultation on Church Union. The uniqueness and creativity comes in at the point of taking any form of worship, without being bound by the form and allowing the Spirit free movement, so that one responds to God’s action in history in faith—not only a response to what God has done in black history.

The reason blacks can take the words of a song written by a white composer and give them “new life” is precisely the genius of worship in the black experience. The same ingenuity employed in regard to songs and music is indicative of the remodeling, reshaping and refashioning of the white man’s way of worship into a unique black experience.

While worship in predominantly white churches is criticized in the ecumenical movement, including the white churches in the Consultation on Church Union, from the standard of early church tradition, worship in the black church must be looked at with a perspective on the black experience of slavery as well.

Worship is central to the ecumenical movement. It is definitely a theological concern. The way blacks worship is determined on the basis of how blacks see and respond to God. This makes it a theological matter.

¹⁶ William Nicholls, *Jacob's Ladder: The Meaning of Worship* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1958), p. 14.

¹⁷ *Liberation and Unity: A Lenten Booklet* (Nashville: The AME Press, 1976).

Therefore, when we speak of the differences in worship of the black church from that of the white church, we are really pointing out a disparity in the perception of, and response to, God in history, the present moment, and what He promises for the future.

It will be difficult to do anything enduring in the ecumenical movement until black and white Christians can truly, wholeheartedly worship together. When we really worship together, it will mean that we are closer to a common agreement on what the Lord's Supper means, what the Word means, what God in Christ did for us and does for us.

A New Sense of Appreciation

Since the advent of the slogan "Black is beautiful," which has more of a secular origin than a religious one, many blacks came to feel even more proud of their worship experience. There is the feeling that all aspects of blackness, including worship, were part of this "new" thinking of blacks in America. There was a new sense of appreciation for what blackness was all about in life, in work and in worship. Some said, "Black is beautiful and so is worship in the black experience."

Gayraud Wilmore queried as he wrote for the 1976 Lenten booklet:

What is it? A certain lilt of music, of bodily movement in the processional? A certain way of "opening the doors of the church," or receiving tithes and offerings? An impassioned¹⁸ intensity in preaching, a way of turning a phrase, of painting pictures with words or of telling a story? A way of making people feel that they are "somebody," or encouraging spontaneity and improvisation, of "using the church"¹⁹ for winning elections as well as winning souls? Whatever it is, it deserves to be called black because it issues out of Negro faith and life; it belongs to 375 years of dealing with God sometimes through, sometimes over, and sometimes in spite of The Man; it belongs to our struggle for survival and liberation as an oppressed people.²⁰

Blacks have never accepted Joseph Washington's view that the exuberance of the black Church was just a leftover from the white Baptist and Methodist, that is dubbed "escapism"; and that "Negroes took refuge in institutional and emotional fervor as a substitute for militant and direct action."²¹

The "action" of the black Church has always been proudly a part—an integral part—of its worship; one has flowed from the other. The black church did not separate its faith from society.

¹⁸ Raymond Abba, *Principles of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Joseph R. Washington, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 96.

²⁰ *Liberation and Unity: A Lenten Booklet* (Nashville: The AME Press, 1976), p. 21.

²¹ Joseph R. Washington, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 96.

There continues to be the proud belief that the beauty of blackness, its creativity and uniqueness in worship is to be treasured, realizing that all is to the glory of God.