

A Response to Dr. Williams' Presentation

Williams' article, a highly significant theoretical contribution regarding the complex nature of the phenomenon of black worship, fills a lacuna in the literature about the subject. It challenges us to rethink our theological, as well as our social science, presuppositions about worship behavior. As of yet few studies have been done on the subject. A recent article by Professor Trulear, a Sociologist of Religion, carefully assesses the meanings behind the idiomatic expressions invoked in the worship ritual of the black church.¹ His approach ought to be looked at in relation to what Williams has done. Williams, as a philosopher of religion, is concerned that we understand that worship, even black worship, is inclusive of more than a Christian view of reality. It must be construed as "embodying something more than the one-dimensional posture of admiration, honor, devotion, or idolization tendered a divine being."² Such an understanding of worship explains why Williams would adopt the theoretical method of an anthropologist rather than a Christian theologian. For this reason he chose the theoretical method of the anthropologist Victor Turner. The latter's method importantly appreciates the interconnective relationship between ritual behavior and symbolism. He clearly shows, in his paper, that symbols "may well reflect not the structure and anti-structure, and not only 'reflect' but can contribute to creating it."

Howard Thurman's vision of the sacred makes an ideal case study for Williams to test Turner's theoretical presupposition about structure and anti-structure. Thurman's vision of the sacred, the focal point of Williams' inquiry, is "the anti-structure that both reflects and *creates* a more inclusive understanding of black worship."³ Although deeply ap-

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¹ Harold Dean Trulear, "The Lord Will Make A Way Somehow: Black Worship and The Afro-American Story," *The Journal of The Interdenominational Theological Center* XIII (Fall 1985): 87-104.

² Robert C. Williams, "Worship and Anti-Structure in Thurman's Vision of the Sacred," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XIV (Fall 1986): 162.

³ *Ibid.*

preciative of his seminal contribution to the subject, I had hoped that Williams would have done more to illuminate for us the following concerns: a) To show how Thurman's vision of the sacred created an area of marginality (anti-structure) between the traditional black church worshipping community and the young black college intellectuals. The latter were greatly influenced by both Thurman's method and philosophy. Thurman, because of his erudite training and unconventional practices of spirituality, was primarily solicited by black audiences of the academic community. He was commonly heard in college chapels and lecture halls. This meant that he made his presentations on territory that was marginal to where the black masses worshipped. He became what *Ebony* magazine called a "guru" for the upwardly mobile of black America. Williams assumes that this is common knowledge to his readers. He could have suspended his modesty and reflected on the impact Thurman's vision of the sacred had on his own intellectual and spiritual odyssey. Williams is of that generation of black intellectuals who stand in that area of marginality that Thurman's vision of the sacred created between the traditional black worshipping community and themselves. In addition, he could have cited Thurman's influence on leaders such as Martin L. King, Jr., Vernon Jordan and Kelley M. Smith, Jr., to name a few.

b) To show how Thurman's vision of the sacred's valuing of embodied self-worth in the worship ritual was antithetical to the notion of self-debasement espoused by traditional black church worship. Williams rightly observes that Thurman understood the self's capacity to reflect upon the experiences of its core self to be the gateway to the spiritual world:

There is something private and personal about being oneself. At its core, this privacy is spiritual in nature, it is like being a private island on a boundless sea.⁴

The fact that the self can experience its own individual solidarity is what makes it uniquely identifiable from other selves:

To experience one's self is to enter into a solitary world that is one's unique possession and that can never be completely and utterly shared.⁵

Since the human spirit cannot abide enforced loneliness of isolation, it must search for its common ground. Williams observes that the self's search for the common and the unifying is sacred; and this sacred is what constitutes both the parameters and essence of worship.⁶ Hence Williams is now prepared to tell us what constitutes Thurman's vision of the sacred: ". . . The sacred as the unity which undergirds the diversity

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

in human beginnings, structures, dreams, forms of consciousness, and the instances of identity.⁷ Worship is the self's search for the ground of both its independence and the interdependence of all life.

The above notion of the self's crucial place of value in the worship experience is antithetical to the puritanized notion of Christianity which taught that the self had no worth before God. Traditional black churches of America, to be sure, adopted, perhaps unconsciously, this theological presupposition. Espousers of this position believed that the self's debased nature (sinful disposition) made it an offense to God, hindering any genuine relationship between God and humans. Since human beings could not overcome this hiatus, because of their unworthy nature, it was believed that only God could change the self's nature. Because of what God did, all human beings are required to empty themselves in God's presence. This position taught that the self in its singular encounter with the Supreme Other is fear-stricken by an acute awareness of its insecurities. The following statement from a traditional black church worship service is illustrative of the claim here:

O Lord, we come this morning
 knee-bowed and body bent
 Before thy throne of grace.
 O Lord—this morning—
 Bow our hearts beneath our knees
 And our knees in some lonesome valley.
 We come this morning
 Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,
 With no merits of our own.
 O Lord—open up a window of heaven
 And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
 And listen this morning⁸

Despite the aesthetic beauty of the prayer, the critical fact is that the "pray-er" invites us to see God through the reality structures of a society predicated on a slave-Lord relationship. The prayer measures himself/herself by the society's merit system: "Like empty pitchers to a full fountain, with no merits of our own." Slaves are socialized to think that they have no merits of their own. Perhaps it is the feeling of meritlessness that motivates the prayer to make such modest request:

O Lord—open up a window of heaven
 And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
 And listen this morning.

It is against such background that Thurman's vision of the self and the Supreme Other must be appreciated. Another passage from Williams'

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York: Viking, 1927), p. 13.

article accents the antithesis that is being alluded to here for Thurman:

The self in its singular encounter with the Supreme Other has the confidence of ultimate security, lasting worth, and an abiding sense of purpose, a confidence which is nurtured in worship as the sacred search for unity and harmonious living.⁹

I would suggest to Williams that Thurman's position about the self and its vision of the sacred created a needed anti-structure for a new generation of formally educated black Americans to stand in creative tension with the worship styles of their parent's generation. Thurman's theological presuppositions about the self and its vision of the sacred would provide the foundation for a new, aggressive, confident, social self. It would give the academically trained a structural context from which to examine with critical appreciation the worship style and content of their ancestors.

⁹ Williams, "Worship and Anti-Structure in Thurman's Vision of the Sacred," p. 171.