

The Theological Validation of Black Worship

The sheer breadth of this topic invites the widest possible consideration and the most esoteric and subjective treatment. It cries out for narrowing, and for the setting of some limits that will not obfuscate the principal inquiry itself. The writer himself feels the impulse to "sound off" before allowing sufficient reflection and the patient analysis that the topic deserves. What a temptation it is to unload all of one's prejudices and stored up complaints about a matter that is so fraught with emotion!

First, there is indeed an urgent need to address the issue of Black worship, for the spiritual needs of Blacks, compounded by their historical and endemic economic deprivation, social insularity, civil injustices and cultural isolation, somehow are reliably and honestly reflected in the varieties and styles of Black worship, including those common and seductive forms of idolatry that have crept into *most* worship experiences. Religion is highly vulnerable to the anthropomorphisms that are indigenous to the culture and to the easy identification of God with the "dearest idols" we have known. Black worship is likewise vulnerable to such idolatry, the "worship" of order, size, personalities, affluence, class distinctions, power and prestige. It is also vulnerable to the emotional responses, to extreme quietness, rhythm, crowds, loudness, organ sounds, vocal perambulations, glossolalia, dancing and moaning. Blacks are as capable as any others of giving the praise that belongs to an infinite and eternal God to finite and temporal objects and giving the focus to ancillary religious expressions and practices that should be given only to a high and holy God.

Any persons who have made the circuit among Black churches, from the high Anglican, with acolytes, incense and the Evensong, to the shouting, whooping, whining and breathless ecstasy of a charismatic Baptist or Pentecostal church, will know that some thought should be given to the whole question of valid worship for *any* people; and with our unique-

* Dr. Proctor is a nationally known scholar, and pastor of the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York City. He is also Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor Emeritus, Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University.

ness, it is especially relevant for Black people. It is not a trivial pursuit. It has to do with the whole matter of what is happening to the most important aspect of our total being, our quest for communion with the good, the true, the ultimate, the beautiful, the abiding and the eternal.

The topic deserves attention not only because of the distortions and the misrepresentations that some worship experiences project, but because of the helplessness and the abuse of so many trusting souls who look upon church and clergy with respect. Further, it deserves attention because of the possibility of the denial of opportunity for authentic and sincere worship, and communication with God, on the part of a people who have been compelled to look beyond history and culture for the affirmation of their personhood, for life's true meaning, and for a hope and a faith that transcend the evil, the racism and the rejection of the world. Blacks have never been able to take their faith lightly. They have been driven to stay close to the radical and culturally transcendent message of the gospel, as Robert McAfee Brown has described it:

The institutional church has done a pretty good job for 2000 years of keeping the radical message of the gospel under wraps, and we may accept it as axiomatic that it will continue to do so. . . . The radical message, nevertheless, is there, and it is not going to go away—one of the advantages of possessing canonical writings that cannot indefinitely be bent to the hermeneutical desires of those with power. Indeed, one thing that ties together Christians otherwise divided by race, class, skin color and geographical location, is that despite all those differences, they share common scriptures, out of which a common faith is always escaping ecclesiastical and cultural control, and rising up to challenge and ultimately defeat the pretensions of those who try to control it for their own ends.¹

Black worship deserves discussion also because of our marginal social experience that is fragmented, disintegrated, lacunal and debilitating. Our need for a pillow of a cloud by day, and a ball of fire by night, to guide us to our Canaan, across the desert of our pain and travail, is an urgent matter. We have had to look to religion with an earnestness and a zeal that could easily be exploited and misdirected. And when this God hunger is treated with vulgar profaneness, it is a matter of life and death for us. It is surely the case for others as well, but most others in our society have a repository of social experience replete with positive references. Our social experiences have been negative, destructive and self-denying. This is especially true of our need to find in the Scriptures those evidences of God's deliverance. This is why the Exodus has always meant so much to Blacks, as J. Deotis Roberts explains:

The Exodus is the exegetical thread which runs through Black religious history from its inception to contemporary Black theology and which has provided the perspective

¹ Robert McAfee Brown, "Perspectives from the Alternative Theology Project," *Doing Theology In The United States* 1 (Spring/Summer 1985): 21.

for preaching, music and thought. The remembrance of things past in reference to bondage and freedom is a sacred thread that provides continuity for the faith of Black Christians. It follows that the call to remember the providential purpose of God in the liberation of Israel of old has profound meaning for Black people no less than for the Jewish people. Blacks participate in this event indirectly through the revelation of faith, rather than through their direct participation in the Exodus or the holocaust. Also, it is slavery in the United States that provides the paradigmatic connection to the Exodus in the history of Black faith.²

The task is, first of all, to ascertain the criteria for valid worship for *any* people in the Christian context. What is theologically valid worship for any group? The limitations are that the question is addressed in the context of the Black experience in the United States and from a Christian, Protestant perspective. The writer readily disclaims any competency to deal with the topic focussing on African or Caribbean Black worship, or the Moslem, the Roman Catholic, or Coptic experience. There is no apology for this limitation, for the issue is so pressing for the Black Protestant community in the United States that the broader, more global considerations could detract from an urgent, simple and forthright approach. However, scarcely could anything be said about Blacks in the United States with authenticity that did not tacitly or explicitly acknowledge the residuals of our African past, despite the unsettled debates on what that quotient may be.

We are searching here for some understanding of this kaleidoscopic array of Black people in our family of Protestant communions, with our great variety, in our approach to the experience commonly called the worship of God. Given these limitations, we must begin with an understanding of the criteria of theologically valid worship for persons generally, Black or otherwise. What makes worship theologically valid?

Theological validity requires, first, that one step forward and declare without equivocation where he or she stands theologically, or this question will stay in the air somewhere like a helium balloon and never touch ground. Unless one asserts a position on "theological validity," there is no basis for discussion. And, oddly enough, the emphasis here is on "validity," and "theological" is the modifier. Therefore, one has some liberty in signing off on his or her understanding of the "theological" quality of the "validity" in honestly and faithfully describing "theological" as a given and by being held accountable as it is applied with the term "validity." In other words, in order to speak of the theological validity of Black worship we are not about the business of inventing "theological." We are indeed about a closer look at Black worship and how it squares with what we acknowledge to be valid worship, theologically.

² J. Deotis Roberts, "Perspective from the Alternative Theology Project," *Doing Theology In the United States* 1 (Spring/Summer 1985): 24.

One should welcome an opportunity, anywhere, anytime, to confess what it means to himself/herself to do "God-talk," for that is theology—"God-talk." And, this discussion calls for us to settle on what we mean when we do "God-talk"; and then we must hold that in mind while we lift up Black worship beside it. And, then the question must be answered: "If this is Black worship; and if this is our understanding of "God-talk," can this Black worship be judged valid in the light of our understanding of "God-talk"? Does what we know about God square with what we find in Black worship? If not, where is the problem? What must give?

Next, of course, we must set some limits on the term "Black worship." This is troublesome because often, on the one hand, when Black persons are at worship they are following exercises invented outside of the Black spiritual sojourn altogether. And, often, on the other hand, when they are allegedly at worship, something else entirely is actually happening, frequently nothing more than a pagan, sensuous klan-gathering where God is mentioned incidentally. Despite the risks involved, therefore, for the sake of clarity, some perimeters must be placed on the term "Black worship."

Obviously, Black worship will bear its own *imprimatur*; it need not look like other forms of worship. It was born out of different conditions, and it has had its own symbiosis with the changing conditions in America and the Black response. Any attempt to ignore this uniqueness, this "folk" aspect is an error. Gayraud S. Wilmore reminds us:

To the extent that these groups and others continue to draw their main strength from the masses, they will foster the rationalization of certain elements of black religion toward the pursuit of freedom and social justice. Their ideological roots, however, must go down into the soil of the folk community if they are to maintain their credibility. That is why the lower-class black community must be considered one of the primary sources for the development of a Black Christian theology.

Folk religion is a constituent factor in every significant crisis in the black community. We ignore it only at the risk of being cut off from the real springs of action. When the black community is relatively integrated with white society, the folk religious elements recede from black institutions to form a hard core of unassimilable nationalism in the interstices of the social system—biding its time. When the black community is hard-pressed by poverty and oppression, when hopes are crushed under the heels of resurgent racism, then essential folk elements exhibit themselves and begin once again to infiltrate the power centers that ignored or neglected them.³

C. Eric Lincoln makes the same point regarding the emergence of an adaptive, accommodated Black expression of Christianity that will not go away:

³ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 235.

Often, when the white man's worship service was over, the black man's might truly begin, for neither his heart nor his private membership was in the white church, where he was scorned and demeaned. There was that other church, that invisible institution which met in the swamps and the bayous, and which joined all black believers in a common experience at a single level of human and spiritual recognition. Deep in the woods and safely out of sight of the critical, disapproving eyes of the master and the overseer, the shouts rolled up—and out. The agony so long suppressed burdened the air with sobs and screams and rhythmic moans. God's praises were sung. His mercy enjoined. His justice invoked. There in the Invisible Church the black Christian met God on his own terms and in his own way without the white intermediary. That invisible communion was the beginning of the Black Church, the seminal institution which spans most of the history of the black experience. It offers the most accessible key to the complexity and the genius of the black subculture, and it reflects both a vision of the tragedy and an aspect of hope of the continuing American dilemma.⁴

Nevertheless, with the criteria for Christian worship before us, along with an understanding of Black worship, the answer to our question lies in applying our criteria for theologically valid worship to what we characterize as "Black worship."

When Is Worship Theologically Valid?

Christian worship is the adoration and praise of God and the exercise of seeking communion with God, privately or corporately, in a cathedral or in a tent, in a temple or an open field, at home or in a store-front.

This writer is a practitioner in Black worship. He serves a Black congregation in Harlem with a long history of identification with Black people at the vortex of their struggle for meaning and liberation in America. Each week he is engaged in *praxis* that interplays with theory. Each week he must ask himself if what happens at worship has validity. Therefore, he lives and struggles with this issue week in and week out. What, then, are the criteria in use, in his experience? As he selects the hymns, the anthems, hires the musicians, selects a text, chooses a sermon theme, orders the service, selects the words and phrases of his prayers, decides on the hour and length of the service and the color of his gown and hood, what on earth lies in the back of his mind? What gives coherence to his effort?

Admittedly, this is only one way of getting at the question, looking at the private experience of an average or prototypical Black practitioner. One could turn to classical theology and look for criteria there or to the Scriptures. Nevertheless, as we look at it from the perspective of a prototypical practitioner, with a case study methodology, what do we find?

Christian worship may be judged in many ways, but if one judges it in

⁴ C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), p. 33.

the light of the ideas, the practices, the outlook and attitude of Jesus Christ, the burden of proof is on all others who choose other approaches. In other words, in judging or assessing Black worship, or any form of Christian worship, we should ask, fundamentally, how closely it corresponds to the attitude and ideas of Jesus. And this is where this writer takes his position. The centrality of Jesus was the principal affirmation of Black religion, and Black worship is anchored in this affirmation. Despite the myriad ways in which their treatment differed at the hands of Christian slave-masters, they emerged with their Jesus-faith intact. Cone summarizes this matter as follows:

It is this affirmation of transcendence that prevents Black Theology from being reduced merely to the cultural history of black people. For black people the transcendent reality is none other than Jesus Christ, of whom Scripture speaks. The Bible is the witness to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Thus the black experience requires that Scripture be a source of Black Theology. For it was Scripture that enabled slaves to affirm a view of God that differed radically from that of the slave masters. The slave masters' intention was to present a "Jesus" who would make the slave obedient and docile. Jesus was supposed to make black people better slaves, that is, faithful servants of white masters. But many blacks rejected that view of Jesus not only because it contradicted their African heritage, but because it contradicted the witness of Scripture.⁵

Following Jesus, we find that worship was at first simple and unpretentious. He criticized those who were carried away with tithes of "mint, anise and cummin" and who "neglected the weightier matters of the law." He taught that one ought not to pray with ostentation, or parade one's religious loyalties. He taught simplicity in our relation to God. He taught that the true worshipper worshipped in spirit and in truth; and that it did not matter where that worship took place, in the mountains of Samaria or beside a quiet, shallow stream.

He taught simplicity and he taught sincerity; he taught trust and openness with God. His own practice was to be quiet every now and then and to lay his own life bare before God. His temptation experience was precisely a moment of such candor, when he acknowledged the lures that tugged on his heartstrings. Likewise, in Gethsemane he underwent a long period of confession and affirmation with God.

The centrality of Jesus in Black religion has particular significance because Blacks identified so closely with Jesus as Liberator. Cone writes:

In the final analysis we must admit that there is no way to "prove objectively" that we are telling the truth about ourselves or about the One who has called us into being. There is no place we can stand that will remove us from the limitations of history and thus enable us to tell the whole truth without the risk of ideological distortion. As long as we live and have our being in time and space, absolute truth is impossible. But this concession is not an affirmation of unrestricted relativity. We can and must say

⁵ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 30.

something about the world that is not reducible to our own subjectivity. That trans-subjective "something" is expressed in story, indeed is embodied in story.

Story is the history of individuals coming together in the struggle to shape life according to commonly held values. The Jewish story is found in the Hebrew Bible and the Rabbinic traditions. The early Christian story is told in the Old and New Testaments, with the emphasis on the latter as the fulfillment of the former. The white American story is found in the history of European settlements struggling against dark forests and savage people to found a new nation. The Black American story is recorded in the songs, tales, and narratives of African slaves and their descendants, as they attempted to survive with dignity in a land inimical to their existence. Every people has a story to tell, something to say to themselves, their children, and to the world about how they think and live, as they determine and affirm their reason for being. The story both expresses and participates in the miracle of moving from nothing to something, from nonbeing to being.⁶

For Jesus, worship and communion with God were far from exclusively a Sabbath session of formal worship. Had he remained present in body with the newly emerged church we cannot tell what he might have preferred, but at best we can only infer that our traditions and styles of worship are a far departure from the practice of Jesus.

However, the New Testament is *germinative* rather than *normative*. The teachings and practices of Jesus were not a new legalism. He forbade such. When asked, "Who is my neighbor?" he replied that anybody who is hurt, bruised, alone, left to die in the street is our neighbor. "How many times must I forgive my brother?" Any number of times. Seventy times seven. Let your spirit be a forgiving spirit. His was not a "cook-book" religion of proscribed recipes.

He did not give us a roadmap but a direction. He did not give rules but principles. And they are binding, even in their broad and general application. There are no soldiers to compel us to carry their backpacks. We are not under an occupation army. But we still have opportunity to demonstrate how to rise above legal demands and live by a higher law. It is impractical to continue to give away our second coat, but it is still a sin to be stingy, callous and indifferent toward the poor.

So, if we were to regard his teachings and practice on the matter of worship as *germinative*, the starting point, the first principles, then anything in worship that was showy or ostentatious, anything exhibitionistic or pretentious, anything for our glory rather than the glory of God would be prohibited. These would violate the principle of simplicity.

Anything in worship that was misleading, deceptive, fraudulent or a misrepresentation of truth would violate the principle of sincerity. Pretending to be spirit-filled in order to appeal to the emotions of naive and unsuspecting people is *ipso facto* invalid. Dressing in such a manner as

⁶ James H. Cone, "The Content and Method of Black Theology," *The Journal of Religious Thought* XXXII (Fall-Winter 1975): 102.

to focus attention on oneself rather than on God is invalid. Gathering people for the worship of God and "shaking them down for money" is a fraud and is invalid worship. Inducing worshippers to direct attention away from God to sensuous topics and feelings, to exploit their gullibility, innocence, naiveté and emotional vulnerability for private gain is invalid. These all fly in the face of the sincerity that Jesus taught and practiced.

Indeed, there are those whose sanctuaries are adorned to glorify God, whose services are highly emotional, and who really believe in the efficacy of such practices as faith, healing, and who are coherently, consistently and faithfully in consonance with the teachings and practices of Jesus: simplicity, sincerity and trust. Wyatt T. Walker addresses the issue of variety in Black worship, all of which may be consistent with the criteria of simplicity, sincerity and trust:

Jesus is the central figure in the theology of the contemporary Black Church. In fact, the form of Christianity practiced by the folk community in Black America is appropriately called the Jesus faith. It is an evidence of the nonacceptance of traditional European theological systems. The Jesus faith of Blacks reveals an Africanization of Christianity rather than the Christianizing of Africans. It stands counterposed to western Christianity whose trinitarian formula is capitalism, racism and militarism. The Jesus faith is colored by its cultural antecedent, traditional West African religion, and is thereby "wholistic" in its theological posture. It is an everyday religion that sings "Amazing Grace" over dishwater and invokes God's help for a good number to play in the number-game. It is not devoid of the traditional accoutrements of western-style Christianity, but it is more than ceremony and form. It explores the world of faith healing and ecstatic joy in religion. The presence of speaking in tongues and holy dancing are frequent. The realm of the supraphysical is just a prayer away. God can do anything but fail!⁷

Unfortunately, however, in cathedrals, in store-fronts on Harlem's 131st Street, in ornate Texas tabernacles and glass temples in California, the themes, the motivation, the practices, the sermons and the music may all be designed and presented without the consonance of the mind of Christ. Indeed, medieval cathedrals, often built to assuage the vanity of dukes and barons, lords and ladies, bedecked in precious jewels to compete with other cathedrals, were dedicated to the most high God in pomp and ceremony, with long processions, with dignitaries clad in silks and satins, carrying gold chalices and silver crosses; but the lonely Galilean still rode into Jerusalem sitting sideways on the back of a donkey, and he was the Son of God.

Assuming that valid worship of God, in the Christian context, is worship that follows the spirit, the style, the motivation and the attitude of

⁷ Wyatt Tee Walker, Harold A. Carter, and William A. Jones, Jr., *The Black Church Looks At The Bicentennial* (Elgin, Ill.: The Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 1976), p. 61.

Jesus, such worship will conform to the simplicity, the sincerity and the trust that Jesus taught and practiced.

Theology is empty verbosity without the element of trust. Nothing could be more meaningless than words about God without the risk of trust. "God-talk" is sounding brass without commitment. This is true of any "ology," but theology, with God as the topic, is nothing but noise without the investment of trust. Worship in the name of God lacks the tangible, material, empirical evidence that an activity in physics, pharmacology or even astronomy may have. Yet, even without such empirical tests the most important issues of life must be decided, and in place of the empirical lies the intuitive reach of faith and trust. So, as was the case with Jesus, we worship when we exercise our trust in God's existence, in his accessibility, in his love and power. And, any trifling, casual or superficial act or gesture that deals with trust lightly or not at all such as prayers "prayed" to the congregation, songs sung for applause, sermons preached to amuse or to entertain are far from the mark and fail to engage the attitude of trust in God.

Worship that is theologically valid is worship marked by simplicity, sincerity and trust. Of course, these all include other basic elements such as confession, intercession, adoration, edification, commitment and challenge.

What Is Black Worship?

Black worship can only mean worship that takes place within the Black community and which relates to the peculiar Black experience. Surely, worship is worship, and it would violate all that we understand about Christ if we concluded that persons went to God clothed primarily in ethnocentricity. In Christ there is neither male nor female, bond or free, Jew or Greek or Black!

Notwithstanding, Blacks do worship separately because of the existence of two societies in America, and to behave as though there were nothing that could be called Black worship would be deceitful. Charles H. Long has written of the unique Black experience out of which the deep spiritual needs of Blacks derive:

Through the contingencies of history and biology, Blackness has been pre-eminently revealed in the lives and histories of those souls who possess black skins and who have had to undergo the opaque meanings in the modern period. This Blackness is both natural and holy. It is in fact the natural biological fact that destiny has chosen some of human kind to bear this color. For us this is natural, but destiny has also chosen that the last four hundred years have been in fact what they have been and during this time it seemed often as if Blackness had opposed itself even to us. Blackness in its own seasons forced itself upon us in innumerable ways and many of us cried out in amazement and even hate, that we were in fact, Black. And so Blackness caught us people of color in its own convolutions; it forced upon us "a highly exceptional and extremely impressive Other." The otherness of Blackness hit us so hard that we hated

that life could be this way. This Black reality took us down, down, way down younder where we saw only another deeper Blackness, down where prayer is hardly more than a moan, down there where life and death seem equatable. We descended into hell, into the deepest bowels of despair, and we were becoming blacker all the time.⁸

Black worship originated in the slave experience as Blacks blended their African heritage with the Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethos in the plantation South. The conditions and the expressions of this worship are widely known and discussed. Suffice to say here that it was an adaptation, a welding of the evangelical Protestant forms, with African rhythms and corporate feelings, and the longing for transcendence, for relief now and in life everlasting. Again, Wyatt Tee Walker, along with many others, holds to the view that West African religions, as well as the total reservoir of West African art, music, *etc.*, became the source of Black religion in the West, and the fertile soil for Christianity among the slaves. Walker wrote:

The Jesus-faith, new to the transplanted African, had fertile ground in which to grow and develop because we possessed a religious heritage founded on the one-God principle. Christianity might not have taken hold as it did, had we not had a theological orientation of the High God and the concomitant world-view of nature and man. It was that part of our African heritage which was most difficult to destroy. The oral tradition preserved our spirituality and nurtured our newly-found Jesus-faith. Any superficial study of traditional West African religions will quickly reveal that there is no such thing as a non-religious African. The great reservoir of West African culture; art, music, dance, folk wisdom, is traditional African religion. And that religion has been preserved, not in writing, but in the oral tradition, passing from one generation to another.⁹

Therefore, the deliverance and liberation themes have always accompanied Black worship. And, when these are absent, it is because Blacks have turned away from their true and basic spiritual need and taken on the world-view, the *Zeitgeist*, of others, chanting their themes and following their patterns of worship. Granted, there are common spiritual needs that all persons must address in worship, but the uniqueness of the Black experience, and the pervasiveness of the liberation theme in Black worship cause Black worship to be distinctive. God, to the Black worshipper is not some unknown "id," some *Agnosto Theos*, the resolution of a riddle about creation, or the end of a syllogism in logic, or the Prime Mover and the First Cause in physics and astronomy. Indeed, he is at least all of the above but much more. Ronald C. Potter, an I.T.C. student, wrote:

God, in Black Theology, is first and foremost the liberative One. God is not the origi-

⁸ Charles H. Long, "Structural Similarities and Dissimilarities in Black and African Theologies," *The Journal of Religious Thought* XXXII (Fall-Winter 1985): 21.

⁹ Wyatt T. Walker, *The Soul of Black Worship* (New York: Martin L. King Fellows Press, 1984), p. 11.

nator and sanctifier of the status quo. Rather, God is the One who continually calls into question the status quo and subsequently transforms it. Fundamentally, the liberation and humanization of the oppressed attest to the presence of God in human history. One recognizes the divine presence in the world by witnessing the liberation of the oppressed, the elimination of injustice and dehumanization, and by the social transformation of the world.¹⁰

Black worship is characterized by a simple and trusting approach to God in the vernacular available. It is spirit-filled, marking the feeling of release and asylum, defense and protection, dependence and thanksgiving, abandonment of fear and insecurity and "holding to God's unchanging hand."

Because of this trusting aspect of Black worship, it is highly vulnerable to vulgar exploitation and easily deflected from the simplicity, the sincerity; the true trust that Jesus calls us to practice in worship and communion with God, and the true trust in the hearts of the people. Every charismatic leader becomes aware of the proneness of desperate people to anoint their own messiahs and to project into their favorite personalities the answers to all of the frustrations and inhibitions that have been generated in their own struggles for survival.

Dr. Lillian Webb, in her report on the ministry of Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux, wrote:

When he and Mrs. Michaux entered one of the several churches, the congregation rose quickly to honor them. The Elder realized that he could be idolized and implicitly cautioned members to temper their esteem by saying to them, "When you rise to honor me, I kneel to honor God." Members often referred to Michaux in testimonies as "a prophet in the last days." "the Man of God," "The last prophet."¹¹

As we examine the positive and inspiring aspects of Black worship, we need to be mindful of the excesses that come to mind as we hold up the criteria of theologically valid worship.

However, there is one further imperative that we must face regarding this question of the validity of Black worship. Our families are disappearing fast; the discipline and commitment on which the marriage relationship rests are eroded; our youth are carelessly bearing children and leaving this burden on family members and the begrudging and contemptible taxpayers; too many males are wasting in our prisons, in the drug world and forsaking marriage for homosexuality and its psychotic abyss. The loyalty we need for economic and political cohesion is sadly sporadic.

¹⁰ Ronald C. Potter, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in Process and Black Theology," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XII (Fall 1984): 51.

¹¹ Lillian Webb, "Michaux as Prophet," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* VIII (Fall 1980): 10.

The benefits and blessings that worship and faithfulness caused to inure to our fathers, and that—with so much less—caused them to have so much more, and that brought them through deep waters like crossing dry land, and that caused them to scale high mountains like walking on a level place—these blessings are withheld from us. Prophetic utterance cried out against idolatry more than against anything, giving the praise and the adoration that the heart should hold for the Lord to other idols. And I risk the notion that the wells that our fathers dug must now be dug again with the junk and debris cleaned out, that the pure waters might flow again.

We must cease this childish exaltation and applause of anything that anybody wants to do and call it worship of the most high God! All of this cheap exhibitionism, this pretentious yelling and screaming, these profane and self-serving prayers, and these minstrel shows that some dare to call sermons ought not to be encouraged. Our wells are dry! And we need to tap fresh springs of living water, to bring strength and nurture to our lives and to cause our efforts to bear a richer fruitfulness.

In all of our big city ghettos there is more yelling and hollering and wiggling and rocking per square acre than there is corn in Nebraska; alongside this wasted exercise a quality of life that must be improved, and that will require the best of our efforts to overcome the consequences of oppression and exclusion. We do indeed need to look at our worship and separate the circuses from those who seek the Lord while he may be found and call upon him while he is near.

Conclusion

Black worship is valid insofar as God is approached without “form and fashion” but in simplicity and sincerity. It is valid insofar as it avoids superficiality and idolatry and embraces the attitude of trust in God. It loses its validity when the pastor insists on being the object of worship, when the music is presented to glorify the performers, and when the prayers are not prayed to God at all but to the people present. None of the above is said without regard to the peculiar and characteristic modes of Black worship that honestly—and without sham and pretense—arise out of the Black experience. None of the above is a denial of the basic authenticity and sincerity of Black worship that is free, uninhibited, and very overt. The criteria of simplicity and sincerity are not at all in jeopardy in genuine Black worship, no matter how emotional. James H. Cone has made this very clear:

As with the sermon and prayer, the spirituals and gospel songs reveal that the truth of black religion is not limited to the literal meaning of the words. Truth is also disclosed in the movement of the language and the passion created when a song is sung in the right pitch and tonal quality. Truth is found in shout, hum, and moan as these expressions move the people closer to the source of their being. The moan, the shout, and

the rhythmic bodily responses to prayer, song, and sermon are artistic projections of the pain and joy experienced in the struggle of freedom. It is the ability of black people to express the tragic side of social existence but also their refusal to be imprisoned by its limitations.¹²

Television and religious "marketing" are awfully tempting. It is time now for someone to say that too many Black churches are copying the worst elements of "commercial" religion. The music gets sensuous, the preaching becomes entertaining primarily, and the costumes, "props," and decor are for fund raising and "marketing" rather than obedience in discipleship.

Therefore, the rich experience with God, that brought us such a "mighty long way," as he fed us in our deserts of despair and brought water for us out of the rock of persecution and oppression, is about to be forfeited as we dance around the golden calf of commercial, "marketed" religion rather than worshipping in spirit and in truth.

Several years ago, from the agony of his South African experience, Desmond M. Tutu wrote about the spiritual opportunity that the Black experience opened before us, and it is this tone, this expression, this level of love, this Christian dynamic that redefines Black worship:

Our blackness is an intractable ontological surd. You cannot will it away. It is a brute fact of existence and it conditions that existence as surely as being male or female, only more so. But would we have it otherwise? For it is not a lamentable fact. No, far from it. It is not a lamentable fact because I believe that it affords us the glorious privilege and opportunity to further the gospel of love, forgiveness and reconciliation,—the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that is possible to no other group.¹³

In the end, Black worship, as is the case for all true worship, lifts us toward God, from whatever our condition may be, and provides for us the wisdom and the power, the courage and the fortitude to endure, and to run without getting weary, and to walk without fainting.

¹² Cone, "The Content and Method of Black Theology," p. 22.

¹³ Desmond M. Tutu, "Black Theology/African Theology—Soul Mates or Antagonist," *The Journal of Religious Thought* XXXII (Fall-Winter 1975): 25.

The historical reality of black women's intellectual and cultural life is often obscured by the dominant narrative of the black struggle for freedom and equality. This narrative, while essential, tends to focus on the physical and political dimensions of resistance, often overlooking the intellectual and cultural contributions of black women. The historical reality of black women's intellectual and cultural life is often obscured by the dominant narrative of the black struggle for freedom and equality. This narrative, while essential, tends to focus on the physical and political dimensions of resistance, often overlooking the intellectual and cultural contributions of black women.

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