Is there a word from the Lord? Black Revolutionary Christianity, Black Pentecostalism, and Black Self-Determination

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Abstract

This article offers reflections on Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American*

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Revolutionary Christianity.[2] *This essay considers the various expressions of Black Pentecostalism within the analytical lens of Professor West's Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity; consequently, this paper proffers responses to several issues, namely, how do the various Black Pentecostalisms show up as radical agents of Black human identity, liberation, and theology? How can the various Black Pentecostalisms critically engage the Black American predicament by creating community across religious identities? How can various Black Pentecostalisms develop a robust prophetic discourse featuring a pneumatological critique of the prevailing threats to Black life, dignity, and personhood? How might the various Black Pentecostalisms valorize Black culture as inextricably linked to its doctrines, affections, and practices?*

Introduction

Prophesy Deliverance!, first published in 1982, is now over forty years old. This book is a testament to

[2] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An American Revolutionary Christianity: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

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Professor West's brilliance, as well as his profound impact on the Black intellectual tradition broadly and Black prophetic Christian thought and praxis narrowly. In *Prophesy Deliverance!*, Professor West invites all of us to the table of deliberation to consider with him what it means to be an active participant in the struggle for liberation and freedom under the shadow of overwhelming death between the vestibules of the Black Baptist church and the Black Panther party. Because of this, *Prophesy Deliverance!* also witnesses Professor West's understanding of Black life as radical love amidst trauma and Black critical thought as a mode of discourse on the past and present doings and sufferings of Black people in the United States.

Concerning "the Black appropriation of Christianity," Professor celebrates it as a clear but wholly

complex expression of Black spiritual and moral acuity that often shows up in the world as divine connection and courageous action. Reflecting upon this further, he writes:

> the black [sic] creative appropriation of Christianity has disproportionately shaped the form and content of these black [sic] cries and efforts ["The human cry for help and the mortal effort to find a way out of one's trapped predicament"[3]]— for good and bad. Good, because Christian faith has sustained a hope against hope for despised people with severely limited options in an American civilization that prides itself on its liberties, opportunities, and possibilities. Bad because Christian outlooks have downplayed the fundamental role of economic structures and institutions and subjugating peoples and individuals in an American society that views

[3] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An American Revolutionary Christianity: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, 19-20.

> itself as the land of upward mobility and social experimentation.[4]

Here, I find resonances with the social activism and programming of the fiery Pentecostal pastor from Chicago, Arthur M. Brazier. Affirming Black Power as a complex constellation of ideologies for achieving self-determination, Black pride, and self-sufficiency, as a Black Apostolic Pentecostal bishop, Brazier employed the rhetoric of various discursive practices to promote an integrationist agenda. In the name of cultural assimilation and socio-economic inclusion, Brazier deployed a Black Power/Black Theology-informed social program to help Black Chicagoans vie for their piece of the [American] pie by entering mainstream American life.

[4] Ibid., *Prophesy Deliverance!,* 7.

Even though Brazier's Black Apostolic co-religionists scandalized him as a radical, Cornel West, in Prophesy Deliverance! shows that such attempts to meld liberationist ideas into integrationist ideals were part and parcel of a segment of the Black church's historical response to the absurdity of the Black experience in the United States. Here, I reflect on Professor West's text, but with special attention to his proposal for an Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity that seeks to negate what is so as to transform the prevailing realities into what must be. Although Professor West's discussion of the practical and programmatic dimensions of revolutionary Christian perspective and praxis were never intended to reify religious parochialism, in it, I find a theoretical framework with which to examine the religio-social consciousness of Black Pentecostals like Brazier, who

prophesied deliverance vis-á-vis, a Black liberation model that stressed positive self-identity, self-determination, and economic self-sufficiency.

Overview of the Text

Starting with the assumption that "Black people are full-fledged human beings" whose lived experiences have something to say about "what it means to be modern, American, and human,"[5] Professor West employs Black human identity as a theoretical framework to observe the complexity of American cultural identities and politics. Mindful not to treat Black critical thought as a merely diasporic reflection, he instead validates the Black

[5] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!,* 5

intellectual tradition, along with the prophetic character of Black faith, as deep and wide enough to describe, interpret, and evaluate the "doings and sufferings" of Black American life. Without question and with great precision, Professor West does this with a determined intent to transform (read, liberate) Black life in the United States for the better.

Ostensibly, such work is prophetic. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Prophesy Deliverance!,* in the spirit of its author, finds itself nestled in the Black Prophetic Tradition. Dating back to the enslavement of Blacks, the Black Prophetic Tradition, in terms of theological reflection, is distinct from the categorical priestly. Clarifying his use of the prophetic in the text, Professor West rejects a notion of prophecy that is more concerned with predicting an outcome than identifying

"concrete evils" or calling for some "otherworldly paradise, rather than generating enough faith, hope, and love to sustain the human possibility for more freedom."[6] As a result, he describes it as "a profound conception of human nature and human history, a pervasive picture of what one is as a person, what one should hope for, and how one ought to act."[7] Moreover, he establishes that within the Christian tradition, the prophetic is dialectical. In this case, the prophetic "insists upon both this-worldly liberation and otherworldly salvation" the human and the divine—like nature in history—are inextricably bound together.[8]

[6] West, 6.

[7] Ibid., 16.

[8] Ibid., 16-17.

It is important to note that Professor West's discussion of the prophetic nature of Black Christianity is not passive. On the contrary, it is active, urgent, and palpable. Professor West is writing for and on behalf of his people, and the earnestness with which he writes saturates the text throughout. However, for me, it is in his reflection on the two fundamental elements of the Christian gospel—the dignity and depravity of the human person—that I truly comprehend his urgency with the prophetic nature of his narrative arc. Likewise, it is here that I can sense most deeply—on a visceral level— the tireless clarion calls for a collective struggle toward radical transformation that rattles within the four chambers of his heart. Concerning dignity and depravity, Professor West writes.

> The dignity of persons is their ability to contradict what is, to change and be changed,

and to act in the light of that which is not yet. The depravity of persons is their proclivity to cling to the moment, to refuse to transform, and to be transformed. *The Christian gospel accents decision, commitment, engagement, and action, which transform what is in the light of that which is to be.*[Italics mine]

In this love letter to his people, Professor West ultimately affirms the human capacity to change, transform, and develop. However, he is not interested in personal transformation only. Instead, he is arguably even more invested in humanity's capacity to change social, political, economic, and spiritual conditions. Although he strongly discourages flights of fancy that involve machinations of perfection and utopia, Professor West is adamant that humans have

> a moral and spiritual obligation to play a tragic role in history by changing the prevailing realities through negation and transformation—even in the face of death. Here, the Christian categories of dignity and depravity serve him well because, in light of history, the only appropriate prophetic Christian response to death, disease, and despair is to pursue the collective betterment of humankind.

According to Professor West, on matters of democracy and the potential for ongoing betterment, the Christian gospel and Marxism share commonalities, even as they maintain their differences. Concerning difference: whereas Christianity is a dialectic between human nature and

human history that "stresses the dignity and depravity of persons," Marxism is not. On the contrary, Marxism collapses human nature into human practice and human history under the premise that "human nature is nothing other than human practice under specific historical conditions." Marxism's strict historicism conceives of a reality wherein the "eventual perfectibility of persons within history is inevitable." In other words, unlike its Christian counterpart, Marxism affirms that history will get us (humans) where we want to go.[9]

These introductory statements tell of Professor West's burden for Black life—both realized and of its

[9] Ibid.,19.

potential betterment—vis-á-vis its connection to Black prophetic discourse via the Black intellectual traditions. Reading Black faith and thought as prophetic discursive praxis committed to the struggle for betterment also means confronting the diverse ways Black folks participate in their oppression, most especially through embracing whiteness and internalizing white supremacy.[10] So, later in the text, when Professor West explores the possibilities for the confluence of Black liberationist praxis within Black Christian traditions and Marxist frames, he is intent on not losing sight of that which is ostensibly *Black*. In fact, by prioritizing *Black,* Professor West sets the intentions of the text on (1) affirming even the quotidian aspects of Black life as

[10] Ibid., 24.

prophetic expressions of Black creative genius and indestructible love, (2) revealing the heinous nature of the dominant culture's operations of power, privilege, and dominance as violent and thus at the heart of Black trauma, and (3) engaging Marxism charitably but also acknowledging its limitations as it pertains to freedom and democracy. In all of this, *Prophesy Deliverance!* is a literary expression of Professor West's commitment to aid his people—Black people—in plumbing the human condition while struggling for freedom.[11]

***Is there a word from the Lord?*:**
The Black Prophetic Tradition

[11] Ibid.,16.

Is there a word from the Lord?

In 2007, Baylor University Press published an edited volume of response essays to Professor James Hal Cone's 1969 classic *Black Theology and Black Power*. Among them was a chapter essay from Professor West entitled "Black Theology and Human Identity." In this brilliant piece, Professor Cone captured the human nature and human history dialectic inherent to Professor Cone's Black Christianity. With meticulous care to detail, Professor West returns the reader to the historical moment that motivated Professor Cone to write his ground-shaking text. When reflecting on Professor Cone's work, Professor West records his former friend and colleague's righteous indignation. Pulling from the text, he quotes Professor Cone:

> This work…is written with a definite attitude, the attitude of an angry black man, disgusted with the oppression of black people in

> America and with the scholarly demand to be 'objective' about it. Too many people have died, and too many are on the edge of death... Is it not time for theologians to get upset?[12]

To which Professor West critically expounds, "What does it take to unsettle some of these paradigms that generate these fascinating and subtle formulations about God and society while there are people dying in your very midst *and you do not have a word to say about it?*" [italics added][13] In *Prophesy Deliverance!*, Professor West posits that despite what it looks like, indeed, there is a word from the Lord.

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[12] Cornel West, "Black Theology and Black Identity," in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, edited by Dwight N. Hopkins, (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007) ,13. Also see, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 2-3.

[13] West, "Black Theology and Black Identity," 13.

In his chapter essay, "Prophetic Christian Thought," written many years after *Prophesy Deliverance!*, Professor West notes that "[t]he crisis in contemporary American religious life is profound and pervasive." Further, he says, "To put it bluntly, American religious life is losing its prophetic fervor. There is an undeniable decline in the clarity of vision, the complexity of understanding, and quality of moral action among religious Americans." In the same text, he goes on to say that "political and cultural conservatives seem to have silenced most of the prophetic religious voices and tamed the vast majority of churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques. Prophetic religion indeed is at the crossroads in present-day America." Similarly, in another essay entitled "Prophetic Fragments," Professor West expresses deep concern for "the widespread accommodation of American

religion to the political and cultural set." Here, using terms like " suffocating," " emptiness," " political irrelevance," and even " idolatrous," he is leaning into the Black prophetic tradition, and thus refuses to mince words about the inherent danger of these two strange but very familiar bedfellows.[14]

Generally speaking, and despite its name's implications, Black prophetic tradition is not "religious." Nevertheless, it did develop among Black religionists in the United States. On the whole, it is the rhetoric of Black Americans and their resistance to injustice. As such, it speaks truth to power, is bold and audacious, remains fearless even in the face of death, and *calls what is not as though it already was*. Because the Black prophetic

[14] Cornel West, "Prophetic Fragments," in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Civitas Book, 1999), 357.

tradition is communally defined with roots as far back as the nineteenth century, it is inherently dynamic and, thus, always subject to change. Aside from its dynamic and amendable nature, at least six general characteristics make up the Black Prophetic Tradition. For one, the Black prophetic tradition ardently believes that America is the home of Black people as much as anyone else; two, it harnesses biblical prophecy to fight social inequity and inequality; three, it imagines Black identity as a present and future part of this nation's ethos, essence, and existence; four, it contains elements of Black Nationalism; however, it is not necessarily central, nor is it avidly circulated as a main or primary idea; five it is interpretive and evaluative; consequently, it is attentive to the signs of the time—sacred and the mundane; and six, it is bolstered and connected to social action and demanding

cultural atonement (national repentance), e.g., The Black Jeremiad.

In *Prophesy Deliverance!*, the Black Prophetic *Christian* tradition is alive and well. Through it, Professor West situates his work as a long-standing Black Baptist with spiritual roots that go back to Metropolitan Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is from this Black sacred space that Professor West first discovered a Christian faith and identity that abhorred "cheap grace, trite comfort, or childish consolation."[15] In fact, in the Black Baptist tradition, he inherited a Christian sense of responsibility that requires him to "confront the darker side, and the human plights, of societies and souls with the weak armor

[15] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* 6.

of compassion and justice."[16] As a scholar well-versed in the Afro-American philosophical tradition, Professor West reads his Black Christianity as emblematic of the chinked armor—construed as radical endurance— of *love* against the forces of evil, *hope* against the intransigence of injustice, and *joy* against the despair of suffering.

Just as Professor West rejects cheap grace, he also has little tolerance for cheap hope. Looking back twenty years later, Professor West described his purpose for writing *Prophesy Deliverance!* as a critical effort "to transform abstract talk about God and suffering into concrete enactment of existential and political struggles with no human guarantee for ultimate victory."[17]

[16] Ibid., 6.
[17] Ibid.

Here, those challenged by Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre's theology of hopelessness may find context and clarity. According to De La Torre, hope is a way of maintaining oppression among those who suffer the most. Furthermore, he construes hope as a theological trope promulgated by the dominant culture to protect the class privileged from having to either live in solidarity with the oppressed or recognize all the ways they benefit from unjust global socio-political and economic systems. He asserts that hope is an insidious way of domesticating those who suffer the most. At its worst, hope functions as the means for creating the perfect context for the oppressed and the marginalized to prefer the status quo—e.g., pragmatism over a radical praxis needed to bring about liberation—even to their hurt. Therefore, instead of the tone-deafness of hope, De La Torre posits a Christian

ethic of hopelessness. By introducing hopelessness as an ethical frame that reclaims the personal ambiguity of hope that intimates a liminal space and validates the uncertainty of waiting as normal, De La Torre abandons not only hope but also quick fixes. In addition, because he rejects the idea that despair is the opposite of hope, De La Torre also submits for our consideration that the opposite of hope is desperation—which he treats as the external and internal drive to seek correct praxis, even in the face of death. For De La Torre, desperation, rather than hope, is essential to liberation because it is an extension of justice-oriented praxis.

As intriguing as De La Torre's proposition is, even he admits that it violates popular Christian sensibilities. A point not overlooked by two of his fellow Christian ethicists, David P. Gushee and Codi D. Norred. At the

time of their article "The Kingdom of God, Hope, and Christian Ethics," David P. Gushee and Codi D. Norred were critiquing De La Torre's ethical analysis based on his book, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology* (2015), as *Embracing Hopelessness* (2017) had not been released. In *The Politics of Jesús* De La Torre introduces his ethic of hopelessness in relation to "the triumph of justice."[18] Challenged by his abandonment of hope as an illusory product/utopian ideal of salvation history—based on his overall rejection of philosophical ideas rooted in a Hegelian-inspired linear account of history that insists on "the superiority of the Europeans

[18] David P. Gushee and Codi D. Norred, "The Kingdom of God, Hope, and Christian Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics*. Vol. 31, No. 1, 2018, 9.

and the inferiority of non-Europeans"[19]—Gushee and Norred question "whether De La Torre's rejection of Kingdom hope should also be seen as a rejection of Jesus' own hope."[20] A query that discloses their personal investment in foregrounding the hope of Jesus in terms synonymous with the reign or the Kingdom of God.

Taking De La Torre's claims seriously, particularly as it pertains to class privilege, Gushee and Norred consider whether their preferential option for Kingdom ethics is in itself privileged and, thus, "all-too-hopeful" and short-sighted.[21] Appearing to take theological refuge in the Black Liberation Theology of

[19] Miguel De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) 134-135.
[20] Gushee and Norred, "The Kingdom of God, Hope, and Christian Ethics," 10.
[21] Gushee and Norred, 10.

Professor James Hal Cone, Gushee and Norred appeal to his affirmation of the Kingdom of God. However, in doing so, they had to acknowledge that Professor Cone's theological conception of the Kingdom was anything but an abstract nod to spiritual liberation. Likewise, his conception of hope was not "meant to serve as a distraction or to ease the pain of injustice in the world through the promise of heavenly rewards."[22] In short, while they do not find in Professor Cone an expressed theology that fully aligns with De La Torre's ethic of hopelessness, they did discover that Professor Cone held these ideas in tension. Such that while looking ahead to the future, hope is not apathetic, privileged, or in service to systems of oppression. Instead, hope stubbornly resists

[22] Ibid., 13.

and outright refuses "to tolerate present inequities."[23] Concerning the Kingdom of God within this context, the Kingdom "is the action and movement of God…[in] the liberation of the Black community." Said another way, the Kingdom of God involves social transformation, including but not limited to the reconstitution of life options in the context of human history. Consequently, salvation language, vis-á-vis hope, used to subjugate the Black community (e.g., maintain their marginalized status) or stifle their social, political, or economic progress toward a praxis of liberation is *sin*. Not only because it is dehumanizing but also because it is in direct opposition to God, who stands on the side of the oppressed.

[23] Ibid.

Arguably, white western Christianity's failure to consider charitably and critically De La Torre's embrace of hopelessness or Professor Cone's correlation between the incarnate Christ and the realized liberation of Black bodies is fundamentally disconnected from the ways that Black people experience hope, love, or joy as battered, fragile, and tenuous. Because of their history in and with the United States, the interior life of Black Americans, more than any other ethnic or racial group, precariously exist in the suspended middle of "death and desire, extinction and eros, [as well as], failure and foibles."[24] For this reason and others, hope, love, and joy must never be cheapened but liberated as expressions of Black faith, religious identity, and spirituality.

[24] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 6-7.

***We all we got*: Black Revolutionary Christianity and Self-Determination**

What, if anything, do hope, love, and joy have to do with Black Revolutionary Christianity? In the spirit of the text, I say everything. Through *Prophesy Deliverance!* Professor West fashioned a space to consider hope, love, and joy in light of what it means to claim a Christian religious identity in a nation where the mendacity and viciousness of white supremacy are working overtime to contest and push against Black folks' very humanity on the pretense of the social construction of race. For me, *Prophesy Deliverance!* is there a word from the Lord—and not just a word about Black hope, love, and joy abstractly, but rather concretely, pertaining to Black empowerment, pride, and self-determination?

Although each chapter offers a fascinating insight into Professor West's reading of Black spirituality—affect, aesthetic, and praxis, the final chapter, "Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity," is worthy of special attention. In it, Professor West articulates what he understands to be the four central elements of Black Christianity. They are: (1) The philosophical methodology of dialectical historicism; (2) the theological worldview of prophetic Christianity; (3) the cultural Outlook of Afro-American humanism; and (4) social theory and political praxis a progressive Marxism. However, these central claims are not his focus. Instead, in this chapter, Professor West's primary goal "is to put forward the practical and programmatic dimensions of revolutionary Christian perspective and praxis."[25] As

[25] Ibid., 131.

such, he is not interested in producing a history or theory of the Black church as much as he is in offering a reflection on the repression of progressive movements, vis-á-vis Leftist or Marxist movements.

Tracking the development of socio-economic and political divisions and the concomitant trap of rugged individualism, Professor West shines a light on how when such ideologies are imbibed and internalized nationally as democratic notions of success, freedom, and equality, even oppressed social classes and ethnic groups fail to perceive the inherent threat. Indeed, by idolizing the classist, sexist, and racist construct of the so-called American dream, marginalized citizens identified with oppressed classes and groups willingly and unabashedly affix themselves, their values, and their ways of being to an ideal that meshes American life and culture with their

interiority. Historically, this decision often results in the socio-political impotency and apathy of the subordinate class and groups who, favoring practicality and sentimentality, forego engaging in class struggles that threaten to put them at odds with the dominant class and existing power structures.

Despite this history and the disheartening truth that "the United States lacks cultural resources and political wherewithal…to undergo structural social change and fundamental transformation," Professor West remains convinced that the lofty goal of justice, made possible through the equally radical reality of love, is possible. Particularly among "those whose backs are against the wall or for those who believe in a God who sides with the oppressed, sits high, looks low, and works in strange ways." Without question, here, Professor West

is primarily thinking of Black Christians, albeit not exclusively. As he does in diverse ways throughout the text, in chapter five, Professor West observes that Black people, in general, and Black Christians, in particular, possess a "persistent pessimism regarding the American way of life," or what Keri Day describes as "moodiness." A category she takes up in her book, *Azusa Reimagined: A Radial Vision of Religious and Democratic Belonging.*

In this her latest work, Day develops a constructive narrative of American Pentecost, vis-á-vis western Christian pneumatology, through the earliest iteration of the tradition: the revival at Azusa. Rather than read the incipient movement initially as being over and against the dominant culture of the early 20th century, Day grounds it in the era's extant commitment to white supremacy and stubborn fascination with American

exceptionalism. Consequently, Day reads the late 19th and early 20th centuries as concerted and intentional efforts towards establishing white utopias of white Western culture, with a vested interest in sustaining a post-Reconstruction racial hierarchy. Within this racial historical frame, eventually, Azusa emerges as a subversive site challenging white Western normativity and "the distorted market values and racial hierarchies associated with American industrial capitalism that white Protestantism and even many educated Blacks gladly embraced."[26]

Why does this matter? First, Day's proposition about Azusa establishes it as a model "for contemporary religious communities to envision democratic practices of

[26] Keri Day, *Azusa Reimagined: A Radial Vision of Religious and Democratic Belonging* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 40.

belonging against the backdrop of neoliberal capitalism's deep racial divisions and material inequalities"[27] Second, Day's proposition takes the reality of political pessimism seriously, and as such, invites contemporary churches to embrace Azusa's moodiness as a particular type of political pessimism that is responding acutely to the unjust tendencies of American democracy. Although Day's work offers a perspective, it is not interested in offering praxis or being programmatic, vis-á-vis a clear agenda for attending to the marginalized and the unredeemed, [28] Professor West, however, is. Ideally, this means embracing a Black revolutionary Christianity that (1) critically engages the Black American predicament by creating community across religious identities; (2)

[27] Day, *Azusa Reimagined,* 152.
[28] Day, 167.

develops a robust prophetic discourse that features a progressive critique of the prevailing threats to Black life, dignity, and personhood; and (3) valorizes Black culture as inextricably linked to its doctrines, affections, and practices.

Much like De La Torre, Professor West also embraces the meaningfulness of desperation. In the text, having reflected on the general marginalization of Marxism in American life, he writes:

> For Americans, especially Afro-Americans, adopting a particular Marxist perspective and praxis is an act of desperation, yet we live in desperate times; it proceeds from a persistent pessimism regarding the American way of life, yet such pessimism is, for the most part, warranted.[29]

[29] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*,134.

Professor West and De La Torre affirm the usefulness of desperation among the oppressed because desperation instigates action. It does not placate the dominant culture's preference for what is sensible. According to Professor West, desperation within a Marxist construct is an extension of its "commitment to the dialectical method for understanding social reality, viewing class struggle as a central dynamic of the historical process, and affirming socialism as desirable social arrangement."[30]

Although there are various streams of Marxism, Professor West notes that the most popular among Black Americans, historically speaking, is the Leninist stream, which he likens to the dogmatic rigidity common to conservative evangelicalism. According to Professor

[30] Ibid.,134.

West, the Leninist stream of Marxism is often conceived as orthodox Marxism, and this elitist branch tends towards ineffective fundamentalism that rhetorically upholds "the norms of individuality and democracy" but fails to walk them out. Much to his chagrin, the Leninist stream remains the dominant ideology among Black Americans. According to Professor West, "[t]he Leninist denomination of the Marxist tradition in the Afro-American experience began when Cyril Briggs and Richard B. Moore joined the communist Party USA in 1921." From his perspective, the Leninist stream continues to hold the Black community in a proverbial chokehold because of "the relative absence of progressive Marxism in American life."[31]

[31] Ibid., 139.

For Professor West, the lack of advanced or progressive options is a significant disservice to Black Americans in search of a liberation praxis and program that "favors self-organization and self-guidance" as essential to upholding the norms of individuality and democracy.[32] He finds the Councilist stream to be the most promising of the six streams evaluated. Professor West likens this progressive branch of Marxism to liberation theology and recognizes it for its prefigurativism: the idea that "the revolutionary organization of workers which seizes power should prefigure the kind of socialist society to be created."[33] Inherent to the Councilist stream is a counter-hegemonic emphasis on a collective struggle by subjugated persons

[32] Ibid., 136-137.
[33] Ibid.,136.

to redistribute power (negation) and create something new (transformation). An ideological possibility that contains a wealth of potential for marginalized groups in and out of the Black community.

Of import is how Professor West sees progressive Marxism aiding a Black revolutionary Christian praxis in its struggle for liberation. For him, "[a] distinct virtue of progressive Marxism linked to prophetic Christianity is the ease with which it can cooperate with non-Marxist progressive movements." But what about those Black Christians who wish to embrace a revolutionary Christian perspective and praxis and cannot, for ideological reasons, embrace a Marxist frame as a political or social theory, no matter how progressive? Is there room for them? Can they still claim to be "anchored in the prophetic Christian tradition in the Afro-American

experience which provides the norms of individuality and democracy; guided by the cultural outlook of the Afro-American humanist tradition which promotes the vitality and vigor of black life," even if they refused to be formally aligned with or "informed by the social theory and political praxis of progressive Marxism which purposes to approximate as close as is humanly possible the precious values of individuality and democracy"?[34]

Professor West needs to answer either yes or no to these questions. Instead, he generously models through Christian scripture (Luke 4:18) and Black poetry ("Reprise of One of A.G.'s Best Poems" by Amiri Baraka) what he has been articulating throughout about the Black Intellectual and Black Prophetic Traditions, respectively.

[34] Ibid., 136.

Where Professor West has chosen to allow time to do its perfect work and await God's will to be done, there is at least one example of a Black Christian leader who was not a Marxist but worked tirelessly to remain anchored in the Black Prophetic Christian Tradition, promote the vitality and vigor of Black life, and redistribute power to create something new.

Affirming Black Power as a complex constellation of ideologies for achieving self-determination, Black pride, and self-sufficiency, Black Apostolic Pentecostal bishop Arthur M. Brazier employed the rhetoric's various discursive practices to promote an integrationist agenda. In the name of cultural assimilation and socio-economic inclusion, Brazier deployed a Black Power/Black Theology-informed social program to help Black Chicagoans vie for their piece of the [American] pie by

entering mainstream American life. Even as Brazier was scandalized by his Black Apostolic co-religionists as a radical, Professor West, in *Prophesy Deliverance!* shows that such attempts to collapse liberationist ideas into integrationist ideals were part and parcel of a segment of the Black church's historical response to the absurdity of the Black experience in the United States. Contrary to the norm, Brazier *prophesied deliverance* vis-á-vis a Black liberation model that stressed positive self-identity, self-determination, and economic self-sufficiency.

Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer note in the second edition of *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* that a vast majority of Black Holiness and Pentecostal religionists possess an eschatological hope that often presents as a deep emotional display reflective of a desire "to return to 'that

old-time religion."[35] As a result, this subset of Black religionists embraces an apathy that is part and parcel of a religio-cultural disposition that emphasizes socially approved behaviors, attitudes, work ethic, and styles of dress more than engaging in socio-economic or political affairs. The social and political activism of men like Arthur M. Brazier (1921-2010), the former pastor of the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago, proves that while their conclusion is well-founded, it is not universal.

Throughout his life, Brazier maintained that "The United States 'must choose between democracy and repression, between the republic and a police state; for America cannot keep down thirty million people who are

[35] Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 182.

moving up, without destroying the entire nation in the process,"[36] whose life's work was to dismantle "the myth of the intellectual and moral supremacy of [white America]."[37] This was an effort Brazier worked to fulfill through a race and class-focused program of self-determination and grassroots organizations. Brazier, a staunch Black fundamentalist, subscribed to an uncompromising biblical literalism that he radically imagined to establish a Black Apostolic social ethic after the pattern of Christ. Later, while reflecting on this work, Brazier affirmed: "Jesus went to the poor. He did not talk to them about personal salvation only. He first dealt with what the poor considered real in their lives. He dealt with

[36] Walter Hollenweger, *Pentecost between Black and White: Five Case Studies on Pentecost and Politics* (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1974), 13.
[37] Hollenweger, *Pentecost between Black and White*, 13.

their sickness, their leprosy, blindness, and hunger."[38] From his perspective, those who failed to do likewise were complicit in contemporary society's social ills. In fact, Brazier was convinced that on "a fundamental level, every church is participating all the time in the oppressive status quo, either to change it or to uphold it or some mixture of the two . . . If the church does nothing whatsoever and remains perfectly neutral, it will be favoring the situation in this country as it is, including white racism."[39]

Brazier did not work alone, however. Much of his social engagement was in partnership with other Christian-identified organizations. Initially, finding ideological congruences with the Civil Rights Movement,

[38] Sammie M. Dortch, *When God Calls: A Biography of Bishop Arthur M. Brazier* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 92.
[39] Dortch, *When God Calls,* 92-93.

Brazier eventually grew weary of its slow pace of integrationist tactics.[40] With time, his rhetoric of equity and inclusion evolved, taking on the tenor of the emerging Black Power Movement and adopting "Black Power" as a prophetic declaration of Black liberation. Brazier accepted Black Power as a complex constellation of ideologies for achieving self-determination, Black pride, self-sufficiency, and equality by creating Black cultural

[40] As a proponent of Black Power, Brazier advocated for "(1) pride in color, (2) self-determination, and (3) a clear recognition that some form of power organization is necessary to open up the country to the [B]lack race." He maintained the position that "history has shown that black people cannot rely on the moral integrity of organized white society to give power to [B]lack people voluntarily." Arthur M. Brazier, *Black Self-Determination: The Story of the Woodlawn Organization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 5 and 18. His impatience with the non-violent Civil Rights Movement's method of moral suasion resonates with the sentiments found in Vincent Harding's essay, "Black Power and the American Christ." See Vincent Harding, "Black Power and the American Christ," in Floyd B. Barbour, *The Black Power Revolt: A Collection of Essays* (Boston: P. Sargent, 1969).

institutions and economic independence. During an address at the University of Illinois, Brazier remarked:

> Black people, both young and old, know that there is a better world available to them: better jobs, decent housing, good schools, and recognition as human beings. We know how the affluent part of America lives, and just like any other group of Americans, we want our share. [The] Revolution of rising expectations was first expressed in slogans like "freedom now" and "we shall overcome." Both of these slogans stated that the first-felt need to break out of the prison of second and third-class citizenship. However, it is now clear to everyone that the early strategies of marches and/or calling attention to injustices have not brought about the basic changes needed.
>
> The gap between the economic levels of whites and blacks is widening, not narrowing. And housing is more segregated than ever. In the face of America's unwillingness to open the fruits of its society to black people, "freedom now" and "we shall overcome" have lost much of their effectiveness as rallying cries. And much tougher statements

> and strategies are now required. It is becoming increasingly clear that if the Negro is to ever enter into the mainstream of American life, he must acquire power. The word is not "freedom now" but "self-determination[41]

Brazier's vision for Black America in general and Chicago's South Side, especially, was access and revitalization. In particular, he wanted Black Americans to have access to the so-called American dream and achieve it within an economically integrated Black community, free of urban renewal plans rooted in gentrification and segregation, gang violence, and underfunded schools. From the beginning, Brazier

[41] Bishop Arthur M. Brazier, "Excerpt from the University of Illinois Faculty Forum Series, 1960," in "Bishop Arthur M. Brazier Foundation Docuseries, Part 1-The Activist," https://youtu.be/lGaHjY9LBzo (accessed on 9/24/2021).

recognized that access, at least the way he imagined it, demanded community revitalization.

During the 1960s, Brazier determined that the Black Power Movement and corresponding Black liberation theologies of his day provided the best religio-racial framework for his Black Apostolic social ethic. Brazier understood a significant part of his activism and social engagement as helping Black folk gain access to America's "affluence," such that of the core tenets of Black Power, Black self-determination guided his primary goal, which was for Black Americans to find their way out of the ghetto and into open society—mainstream America.[42] Even as he felt a personal burden to act on behalf of Black people, Brazier maintained that realizing

[42] Brazier, *Black Self-Determination*, 12 and 5.

his goal was contingent on their willingness to harness their collective power through a mass-based organization: "[Black Americans] must organize for their basic self-interest. They must organize to find their identity, dignity, and destiny. They must organize in order to keep from being exploited or helped in paternalistic ways by white society. Only then will people of color be powerful enough to claim a rightful place in American life."[43]

Along with mass-based organizations, Brazier also insisted that Black people needed to "reject everything negative the white man has said about them." Brazier was emphatic: Black people must utterly denounce "[e]very sign and hint of racial superiority in the thinking of whites." Next, Black people must identify

[43] Brazier, 12.

with blackness. They must affirm that Black is good and begin to "generate pride in [Black] religion, culture, family, [and] race," without seeking approval from white people and systems of power. Finally, Black people must organize from within, absent of white America's external and opposing political and economic interests. Here, Brazier admonished Black people to "make united, organized efforts to deal with every facet of their own interests in the face of resistance from the Establishment outside and from narrow divisive forces inside."[44]

At every opportunity afforded to him, Brazier insisted that "Black Americans want in—now!"[45] Like his fellows in the Black Power Movement, Brazier was

[44] Ibid., 6.
[45] Ibid., 12.

adamant that Black Americans were not leaving; and, thus, demanded "full and equal participation in all phases of American life." Because "[Black Americans] were not going back to Africa to set up a little reservation" and because they had "too great a stake in this land," the church, particularly the Black Church, could not assume a passive role in the struggle.[46] Instead, according to Brazier, the church's role was to lead "the way in understanding and implementing the struggle of the black man for identity, dignity, and self-determination."[47] As if thinking alongside his contemporary, Professor Cone, and other first-generation Black liberation theologians, Brazier wrote: "Withdrawal of the church into a purely spiritual ministry is indefensible, especially from a

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 6.

biblical Christian view. To do nothing is to take sides with the Establishment in maintaining the oppressive status quo against the black community. But positively affirming the rights and the gifts of the black man [*sic*] and by helping him [*sic*] take effective action, the church can underscore the preaching of the gospel of salvation in Christ by responsible living in Christ."[48]

Conclusion

Although Brazier's work began more than two decades before Professor West penned this manuscript, he, along with Herbert Daughtry—the pastor of the House of the Lord Church in Brooklyn, New York, where Professor West first presented a year-long seminar on the

[48] Ibid.

contents of the text—represent the "signs of hope in the Afro-American community for the institutional expression of revolutionary Christian perspective and praxis" that Professor West talks about at the close. A close that he ends on an electrifying sermonic note. Like the crescendo of good Baptist and, dare I say, Pentecostal preaching, Professor West carries us on the prophetic wings of what was, what is, and what can be. As noted above, he does not merely reiterate his main argument. Rather, he performs, as it were, the pathos that constitutes Black spirituality. During this proverbial altar call, Professor West shepherds us to the mourning bench of Revolutionary Christianity, where we encounter the downtrodden for whom the revolution has been called. There before them, with Amiri Baraka as our hymnist, we kneel and intercede—wading in the waters of trauma,

disenfranchisement, and abuse. There, where the deep calls to deep, and the Spirit intercedes with indiscernible groans, we sit with those left for dead—the forgotten, the marginalized, the despised—but not to sulk and cry. We sit among them in solidarity to strategize, plan, and organize to negate what is and transform the prevailing realities into what must be, in favor of what is better.

When Professor West closed his response essay to Professor Cone, in "Black Theology and Human Identity," he said that "Professor Cone ends *Black Theology and Black Power* on a note of hope, within the best of the black freedom struggle tradition. It is a blood-drenched hope. It is not sunshine optimism, but a blood-drenched hope."[49] However, the same can be said for

[49] West, "Black Theology and Black Identity," 18.

Is there a word from the Lord?

Professor West, who ends *Prophesy Deliverance!* by holding in tension a Christ who proclaims liberty to the captives and an America wading in the blood and screams of the so-called least of these. His call for a Revolutionary Christianity is not idyllic. It, too, is bloody, scandalized, and reeking of death, but it is also hopeful, lovely, and full of joy. As such, *Prophesy Deliverance!* is a sacred account of all that is Black, tragic, and beautiful. Likewise, *Prophesy Deliverance!* is the clarion call that tirelessly rattles in the chambers of Professor's West chest on behalf of the oppressed. Above all, *Prophesy Deliverance!* is a convicting word and a prophetic utterance that promises no rest until we who believe in freedom, equality, and democracy struggle until we see it *come to pass*.

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