

The Mission of the Black Church in 21st century

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My notion of Black churches is predicated on the notion of ‘the Black Church’ in the African Diaspora. I am writing on the firm premise that there are a number of distinctive cultural and theological markers for Black Churches in the African Diaspora.

What is a Black Church?

Perhaps one of the thorniest problems when trying to talk about the Black church is the question of definition. What do we mean by the term ‘The Black Church’? For reasons that will soon become readily apparent, the question is somewhat easier to answer within the U.S. context than it is in Britain or the Caribbean. In the U.S. the notion of the Black church is an ingrained historical, theological, sociological and experiential reality for many African Americans. ‘The Black Church’ has an automatic efficacy that finds expression in myriad forms of discourses and academic courses.¹

The Black church has been perceived by many scholars as the key social, political, educational and organisational entity in the collective and communitarian experience of Diasporan people of African descent.² In Britain, the Black Church is often seen as

¹ There is a rich literature on the development, nature and intent of ‘The Black Church’ in the African American context. The following are the mere tip of growing and impressive iceberg. For further details see C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University press, 1990). Anne H. Pin and Anthony B. Pinn (*Fortress Introduction to) Black Church History* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2002). Henry H. Mitchell *Black Church Beginnings* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2004). Iva E. Carruthers, Frederick D Haynes III and Jeremiah A Wright Jr (eds.) *Blow The Trumpet in Zion* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2005). Michael Battle *The Black Church in America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Juan Floyd-Thomas, Carol B. Duncan, Stephen G. Ray Jr, Nancy Lynne Westfield *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon press, 2007)

² See Dwight N. Hopkins *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 1999), pp.43-44. See also C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham & London: Duke University press, 1990) and Peter J. Paris

the key location for the intimations of Black selfhood and collective solidarity.³

Within the U.S. the Black church is a normative context out of which the Black religious experience has arisen.⁴

The roots of Black churches can be found in the radical and subversive re-interpretation of Christianity by enslaved Africans in the so-called New World, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Black people, having being exposed to the tendentious Christian education of the exploitative planter class in the Americas and the Caribbean began to ‘steal away’ from beneath the close confines of their slave masters to worship God in their own existential spaces.⁵

The desire of Black people to form their own ecclesial spaces was the process of a long period of history, arising from the ‘Great Awakening’ in the middle of the eighteenth century.⁶ It is beyond the scope of this brief essay to mount a detailed analysis of the historical development of Black Churches in the African Diaspora, but it is worth noting the importance of Black existential experience and context to the historical manifestation of such ecclesial bodies. Black ecclesiological method begins with Black existential experience and not historic mandates born of the often abstract philosophical musings as to the nature of the ‘Body of Christ’. Black churches were born of the existential need to create safe spaces in which the Black self could rehearse the very rubrics of what it meant to be a human being.⁷

The Social Teaching of the Black Churches (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1985). See also Anne H. Pinn and Anthony B. Pinn *Black Church History* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2002)

³ See Robert Beckford *Dread and Pentecostal* (London: SPCK, 2000). See also Nicole Rodriguez Toulis *Believing Identity* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997)

⁴ See James H. Harris *Pastoral Theology: A Black-Church Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1991). See also Dale P. Andrews *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002)

⁵ Henry H. Mitchell *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 2004), pp.24-45

⁶ See Anne H. Pinn and Anthony B. Pinn *Fortress Introduction To Black Church History* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2002), pp.6-8

⁷ Henry H. Mitchell *Black Church Beginnings*, pp.8-45

The birth of the independent Black Church in the Caribbean can be traced to arrival in Jamaica in 1783 of approximately four hundred White families, who migrated from the United States, preferring to live under British rule than the newly independent Thirteen colonies. Amongst White migrants were two former enslaved Africans, George Liele and Moses Baker.⁸

In the United States, Christian ministers and activists such as Richard Allen used Christian teachings and a nascent Black existential theology as their means of responding to the need for Black subjectivity. Richard Allen, a former slave became the founder of the African American Episcopal Church (A.M.E.), which seceded from the American Episcopal Church due to the endemic racism of the latter ecclesial body.⁹ Henry McNeal Turner, a descendant of Allen in the A.M.E church began to construct an explicit African centred conception of the Christian faith, arguing that an alignment with Africa should become a primary goal for Black Americans. This focus upon African ancestry would enable subjugated objects of Euro-American racism to find a suitable terrain for the subversive activism that would ultimately lead to the ongoing path for political, social, cultural and economic liberation and transformation.¹⁰ Pinn acknowledges the link between the African centred strictures of the A.M.E. church and the later Black nationalism of Marcus Garvey and the *Black Star Line* 'Back-to-Africa' movement of the early 20th century.¹¹

Responding to the ongoing threat of non-being has been one of the central aims of the Black church that has emerged from the existential experiences of oppressed Black peoples of the African Diaspora. Harold Dean Trulear writing on the importance of Black Christian religious education within the Black Church in the U.S. states

⁸ Noel L. Erskine *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: 1983), pp.41-45

⁹ Anne H. Pinn and Anthony B. Pinn *Fortress Introduction To Black Church History*, pp. 32-43

¹⁰ Anthony B. Pinn *Terror and Triumph*, pp. 90-93

¹¹ Anthony B. Pinn *Terror and Triumph*, pp. 93

Rather it (religious education) has carried upon its broad shoulders the heavy Responsibility of helping African Americans find answers for the following question: What does it mean to be Black and Christian in a society where many people are hostile to the former while claiming allegiance to the latter.¹²

So the historic roots of Black churches emerge from the Black experience of struggle and marginalisation during the era of slavery and was a determined and self-conscious attempt to create liminal spaces where the subjected and assaulted Black self could begin to construct a notion of selfhood that extended beyond the limited strictures of objectified and absurd nothingness of fixed identities.¹³

Ongoing challenges for the future

The historic development of Black churches over the past four centuries has not been without its troubles. Gayraud Wilmore has asserted that the radicalism of the early Black church movement in the U.S. was ceded to the strictures of conventional, normative pseudo White social mores and theological and ecclesial respectability.¹⁴

Within the British context there are issues pertaining to the ongoing struggles for familial cohesion and a sense of the loss of cultural and historical memory. Contemporary post colonial Britain is a context where lives are governed by the all-pervasive influence of a form of societal postmodernism. The old assumptions surrounding family life and collective identities are fast disappearing. In this particular epoch the realities of social and geographical mobility are constantly challenging the traditional notions of collective and communitarian cohesion. These social and cultural factors have been the bedrock on which Black churches have

¹² Harold Dean Trulear 'African American Religious Education'. Barbara Wilkerson (ed.) *Multicultural Religious Education* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1997). pp.162

¹³ Anthony B. Pinn *Terror and Triumph*, pp.52-77

¹⁴ Gayraud S. Wilmore *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983), pp.187-227

gained their traditional strength, and from which the majority of their adherents have been drawn.

The challenge facing Black churches in their historic task of offering safe ecclesial spaces for affecting the liberative impulse for Black existential freedom can be seen in my own formative experiences. I was born into a Black Caribbean Christian family, and although my family attended a White majority church for good deal of my formative years, the values of Black Caribbean Christian traditions, learnt from the Black church of my mother's childhood in Jamaica, was nevertheless, highly visible in my Christian nurture and socialisation.

Prayer remained an important component in my Christian nurture and formation. I can still remember being taught the traditional prayer of 'Gentle Jesus' by my Mother. An informal survey amongst a group of forty-something Black Christians a few months ago revealed that this prayer seems to represent some form of signifier in connoting aspects of an African Caribbean religio-cultural heritage. Learning this prayer was an important moment in my own sense of identity in religio-cultural terms. I still retain the distinct memories of being taught this prayer at my mother's knee at a very young age.¹⁵

Black people have found in God, who is defined in psychological terms as the 'Ultimate Reality'¹⁶; through the facility of prayer a constant and accessible mediator for their troubles and hardships.¹⁷ In this particular understanding of prayer, God is identified in immanent terms. God, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and by and through the power of the Holy Spirit, is manifested in God's own creation, as mediating alongside humankind.

¹⁵ This event and memory of it remains hugely significant in my Christian development. From my Mother, I have learnt the importance of prayer and the need to see this as a literal resource in my Christian discipleship.

¹⁶ See James Fowler *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1981)

¹⁷ See Riggins R. Earl Jr. *Dark Salutations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity press International, 2001), pp.1-16

Reference to the importance of a literal, immanentist approach to prayer has been highlighted in a previous publication.¹⁸ My Mother, in particular, inculcated the importance of praying to God at all times. Accompanying this approach to prayer was the literal, almost eager expectation that God would answer one's petition. There was never any doubt within my Mother's conceptualisation of God that this God was not in the business of assisting and supporting the presence of God's own people. The faithful would be upheld and no forces of evil, such as racism, would over power them. In this respect, the words of Romans Chapter 8, verses 37-39 ring true. The author of this text writes,

'In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love – not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!'¹⁹

One of the central challenges facing Black churches as we walk hesitantly into the twenty-first century is the ability to continue to meet the existential concerns of Black people, whether in Kingston, Jamaica, New York or London. The challenge that faces Black churches is the need to harness the historic resources that have informed and governed her existence to date, juxtaposed with the possibility of discerning new ways of being and doing.

In order to address the challenge of post modernism, the Black church, inspired by an improvisatory approach to Black theology, will gain the confidence to move beyond the strictures of a stultifying form of conformity into which so many of us have been herded. In a previous work I have questioned the conformist strains of many Black churches, influenced by a strict 'holiness' code, which in turn, are governed by the

¹⁸ Anthony G. Reddie 'Jesus in the spaces in my life', in Ruth Harvey (ed.) *Wrestling and Resting: Exploring stories of spirituality from Britain and Ireland* (London: CTBI, 1999). pp.72-72

¹⁹ *The Contemporary English (Version) Bible* Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995. pp.1363

twin concerns of 'shame' and 'racism'.²⁰ Scholars such as Kelly Brown Douglas²¹, Robert Beckford²², Jacquelyn Grant²³ and myself²⁴, have all explored in our many differing ways, the challenges faced by the Black church to move beyond the seemingly endemic forms of conservative thinking and practice that has limited the scope of its prophetic agency.

The challenge that faces Black churches is one of attempting to connect with the post modern realities that presently face Black people and to construct new ways of engaging in the historic mission of challenging injustice and proclaiming the good news of individual and corporate transformation.

In this respect, Black churches need to re-learn the strident and polemical forms of radical Christian praxis that galvanized Diasporan African peoples in previous epochs. This newly imagined paradigm of the Black church is one that will continue to work within the historic tradition that has sustained countless generations of Black people of the African Diaspora, and the younger generations born and socialised in this country.

The challenge is to model examples of good praxis that inspire prayerful dedication and discipleship, which can provide new paradigms by which Black children and young people can begin to gain some semblance of the factors, both immanent and transcendent, that have enabled people of African descent to survive the many travails of the past. Janice Hale says something to this effect when reflecting upon the importance of re-telling stories of experience, by word and example. She writes,

²⁰ See my post sketch reflections to 'It Could Have Happened Like This?' in Anthony G. Reddie *Acting in Solidarity: Reflections in Critical Christianity* (London: DLT, 2005), pp.45-53

²¹ See Kelly Brown Douglas *Sexuality and The Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999)

²² Robert Beckford *Jesus Is Dread* (London: DLT, 1998), pp.61-78

²³ Jacquelyn Grant 'Freeing The Captives: The Imperative of Womanist Theology'. Iva Carruthers, Frederick D. Haynes III and Jeremiah A. Wright Jr (eds.) *Blow The Trumpet in Zion: Global Vision and Action for the 21st century Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2005)

²⁴ See my dramatic sketch entitled 'Black Voices' in Anthony G. Reddie *Acting in Solidarity: Reflections in Critical Christianity* (London: DLT, 2005), pp.109-119

‘These stories transmit the message to Black children that there is a great deal of quicksand and the many land mines on the road to becoming a Black achiever... They also transmit the message that it is possible to overcome these obstacles.’²⁵

Black churches of the twenty-first century must develop a model of Christian mission that inspires and transforms. This cannot be the kind of theological moribund framework that seeks to offer a simplistic and spiritualised placebo for the contemporary and more historic ills that have plagued Black people for the past half millennia. This cannot be the type of Christian practice that seeks refuge in certain forms of abstractions that describe a personal piety, which retreats from the world rather than seeking to transform it.

The kind of Black ecclesiological Christian praxis of which I speak, is the facility that connects with the very heart of God. It is a form of praxis that demands reflective action. The kind of action that is an integral component of faith, whose practical demonstrable consequences, are described in James Chapter 2: verses 14-26. The demand for praxis (action and reflection) finds expression in the salient words of Paulo Freire who opined that

‘Action without reflection is mere activism, and reflection without action is pure verbalism’.²⁶

Black churches need to return to these historic roots in order to be reminded of the factors and facets that once made them amazing centres of for rescue, resistance and renewal. This is not to suggest that there are no Black churches presently doing this type of missiological work in the world. That would be an erroneous proposition on my part. I think it is true to say that there are insufficient churches, of this ilk, for me to rest secure in my bed at night.

²⁵ Janice Hale ‘The Transmission of faith to young African American Children’. In, Randall C. Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant (eds.) *The Recovery of Black Presence* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995), p.207

²⁶ Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* New York: Herder and Herder, 1972. p.68

I am arguing for Black churches to become once again the counter-cultural agencies as they have been in the past. I am pressing for an articulation of the gathering of God's people who are committed to structural and societal change and not simply instant personal gratification and blessing.

This new movement for the work of the Black church is one that is calling her to return to the central aspects of her historic mission. Namely, one that is committed to fighting for justice, liberation and the affirmation of the least of these as Jesus commanded.

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