

African American Religious History

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- ❖ Thesis Statement – This paper focuses upon the Unheralded Leaders of African American Religious Experience in the United States. The *Black Pulpit*, historically has been the locus of black resistance and prophetic voice in America speaking from the margins. For nearly a century, the Black Preacher integrated religion, politics, and the academy in *Speaking Truth to Power*. This period marks the magnum opus of black religious prophetic voice emanating from the Black Church.
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A Century of African American Excellence: The Genius of Unheralded Leaders of African American Religious Experience

The *Black Pulpit*, historically has been the locus of black resistance and prophetic voice in America speaking from the margins. For nearly a century, the Black Preacher integrated religion, politics, and the academy in *Speaking Truth to Power*. This period marks the magnum opus of black religious prophetic voice emanating from the Black Church.

Arguably, Dietrich Bonhoeffer captured best the sentiment that those who are marginalized in society, those who are disenfranchised, those who are powerless, are best situated to serve as the moral conscience of a community. Writing in *The View from Below* Bonhoeffer states this with marked clarity. “It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts...in short from the perspective of the suffering...that we come to see...clearer, freer, more incorruptible.”¹

¹ Clifford J. Green and Michael P. DeJonge, *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2013), p.775.

The lived experience in the United States has been a type of *view from below* for Africans in the Diaspora in America. Black religious leaders have demonstrated extraordinary theological imagination in order to survive enslavement, Jim Crow apartheid, and lynching as a systematic method of genocide. The black preacher wielded the power and influence of the pulpit, the academy, and the political apparatus, to stoke the dreams of the black community through inspired theological imagination. This is often what makes black preaching, the black pulpit and the black preacher unique in the context of the religious experience in America. James H. Cone, writing in *The Cross And The Lynching Tree*, makes the following observation. “People without imagination really have no right to write about ultimate things, Reinhold Niebuhr was correct to observe. No one can claim that black preachers’ sermonic orations lacked rhetorical imagination.”²

The black preacher, black theologian, and black academic, synthesized into one discipline what the White Church understood as a binary; the pulpit was the domain of the preacher, the academy was the domain of the scholar, and the body politic was given expression through the work of the politician. In Black America, no such luxury existed for black people. Perhaps this is a reality inherited by black people from African Traditional Religion, which understands no arbitrary lines of demarcation, separating religious experience from the all encompassing lived experience. J. Omosade Awolalu writing in *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* clarifies this phenomenon. “In spite of the varied forms and systems, religious consciousness permeates every portion of African life; secularity has no reality in the African existence...contemporary African scholars believe that generally all people and groups of Africa believe in a supreme, self-existent

² James H. Cone, *The Cross And The Lynching Tree*, (New York, Orbis Books, 2011), p. 94.

deity.”³ Black people in America instinctively understood that their personality, and hence their worth as human beings, derived from their creator as expressed in the biblical text and understood through the black hermeneutic. The black preacher gave expression to this imagination.

Given a different reality there may have been no necessity to synthesize the church, academy and political life. The genius of the black preacher was his (male dominated misogyny perhaps) ability to deconstruct the hegemonic systems of oppression, and to lay bare the racist structural underpinnings of society. The racism, and racist ideologies, informing the society were more often than not, perpetuated through the structures of the White Church and Eurocentric pedagogy of academia. The black preacher helped to elucidate these systems and interpret them to the larger society.

Miguel A. De La Torre, writing in *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, informs how the dominant culture instrumentalizes morality, ethics and religion to perpetuate a society that preserves the status quo. “As long as the religious leaders and scholars of the dominant culture continue to construct ethical perspectives from within their cultural space of wealth and power, the marginalized will need an alternative format by which to deliberate and, more importantly, do ethics.”⁴ The black preacher and the black pulpit provided that alternative format through their prophetic imaginative voice and activism. Black churches around the United States were transformed into *war rooms* for strategizing and staging the resistance. “Through critical social analysis, it is possible to uncover the connection existing between the prevailing ideologies that

³ Ernest Cleo Grant II, *Looking for Ancient African Religion? Try Christianity: The African Religious Imagination Already Anticipates Christ*, Christianity Today January 2018 <https://www.christianitytoday.com>

⁴ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, (New York, Orbis Books, 2013), p.5.

support the present power arrangement, with the political, economic, and cultural components of the mechanisms of oppression that protect their power and wealth.”⁵ Often, sermons originating in the black pulpit uncovered the connection referenced.

Despite the fact that Christianity in America was often weaponized to destroy the fabric of black life, and to maintain black people as second class citizens, black religion proved to be resilient in the face of this dialectic. Howard Thurman in *Jesus And The Disinherited* mused pensively concerning the seemingly inability of Christianity to serve as a corrective to this glaring dialectic. “...Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself.”⁶

Cone responds to the crisis of faith inherent in the black religious experience. Making use of W.E.B. DuBois, Cone answers Howard Thurman. “Somewhat like his use of the concept of double consciousness to explain the African American search for identity, Du Bois used the paradox of faith and doubt together to explain the meaning of the black religious experience.”⁷ In a move that embraces the reality of doubt intermingling with faith, it affirms the resilience of black religion, in the face of powers which seek to threaten the existential reality of black life. “One cannot correctly understand the black religious experience without an affirmation of deep faith informed by profound doubt. Suffering naturally gives rise to doubt.”⁸

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Howard Thurman, *Jesus And The Disinherited*, (New York, Abington-Cokesbury Press, 1949), p.7.

⁷ Cone, *Cross And Lynching Tree*, 106.

⁸ Ibid., 106.

Black religious leaders were astute enough to discern the deception of oppressive tactics. White Clergy, beginning in slavery and thereafter, often countered the civil rights ideas of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., by appealing to black people to be good slaves, and then in the twentieth century to be good law abiding citizens. To adhere to the religious tenets of Romans 13 and respect the governing bodies both local and federal. Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes this type of deception. Clifford Green and Michael DeJonge observe in *The Bonhoeffer Reader* what Bonhoeffer refers to as *Satan's Truth*. "There is a such thing as Satan's truth. Its nature is to deny everything real under the guise of the truth. It feeds on hatred against the real, against the world created and loved by God...Satan's truth judges what is created out of envy and hatred."⁹

Those white clergy who value law and order, as well as property do so at the expense of the black community. Their insistence upon adherence to the letter of the law, as opposed to the intent of the law to facilitate human flourishing, is a legalistic ethical insistence. It is a Satan's Truth. De La Torre, in a type of transvaluation, explains how his mother, an immigrant with no work experience neither the ability to speak English, negotiated laws in place that would potentially shut her out of the workplace. "If she demonstrated the virtue of honesty...she would never have been hired. Yet, the moral reasoning she employed enabled her to surmount societal structures fundamentally averse to her very existence. Which is more ethical...doing what needs to be done to get the job, or letting the sins of others force us to live on the street?"¹⁰

⁹ Green and DeJonge, *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, p.754.

¹⁰ De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, 22.

The black preacher was able to transvalue Christianity and principle to empower people of color. This is the genius of black religion.

Reverend Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson represents the genius of the Black Church and the Historically Black College and University. Mordecai Johnson was born in Tennessee in the year 1890. Johnson was the son of Wyatt and Carolyn Johnson who had been born into slavery. Most accounts of Mordecai Johnson's birth indicate that he was the legitimate son of Wyatt who was a former slave. This claim presents a difficulty. It is a difficulty that is very familiar to those who are a part of the African American community. One of the striking physical characteristics of Mordecai Johnson, is that one would not necessarily know that he was an African American man. Mordecai Johnson by any rational assessment has the appearance in hue and physical features of European descent. This is not uncommon in African American communities; however, it has been and continues to be a point of contention. It is difficult to fathom the idea, or to reconcile the claim, that Mordecai Johnson is the progeny of Wyatt and Carolyn Johnson, and not the offspring of a forced relationship between a slaveowner and Carolyn. This is conjecture. It is significant nonetheless, due to the fact that fairer skinned African Americans historically were afforded opportunities denied darker skinned African Americans.

Lawrence Otis Graham, a Princeton University alumnus, writing in *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*, makes the following observation. "It was a color thing and a class thing. And for generations of black people, color and class have been inexorably tied together. Since I was born and raised around people with a focus on many of these characteristics...that I

was later to decide...to have my nose surgically altered.”¹¹ Such a conscientious decision would have less to do with aesthetics, and more to do with acceptance within the circles of the Black Bourgeoisie. Graham continues; “...So that I could further buy into the aesthetic biases that many among the black elite hold so dear.”¹² It is an unmistakably salient feature of some of the preferred leadership, by both White and Black America, of African American institutions vis-a-vis the church and academy; faired skinned ‘black’ men. W.E.B. Du Bois, Mordecai Johnson, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., to name only a few, are each capable of *passing*. In an article titled *A Chosen Exile: Black People Passing In White America*, Karen Grigsby Bates makes the following observation. “Loss of self. Loss of family. Loss of community. Loss of the ability to answer honestly the question black people have been asking each other since before Emancipation: Who are your people?”¹³

The trauma of slavery and Jim Crow created a caste system within Black America, which extends into one’s religious experience as well. Who are your people, and what church do you belong to, were queries associated with what opportunities will be afforded one. “They already knew about the obsession our group had with Episcopal churches, good hair, light complexions, the AKAs, and Martha’s Vineyard.”¹⁴ Unbeknownst to most, W.E.B. DuBois’ *double consciousness* does not only originate from outside of Black America, however, from within the

¹¹ Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America’s Black Upper Class*, (New York, HarrperCollins Publishers, 1999), p.4.

¹² Ibid., p.4.

¹³ Karen Grigsby Bates, *A Chosen Exile: Black People Passing In White America*, Code Switch 2014 <https://www.npr.org>

¹⁴ Graham, *Our Kind of People*, Preface xvii.

black community as well. "...A two-ness of being an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."¹⁵

Despite the binary created by the color issue in America, Mordecai Johnson set out to transform Black America. Johnson came to the presidency of Howard University in the year 1926, during the time in which one of his most accomplished faculty, and there were many, Alain LeRoy Locke coined the phrase *New Negro*. Henry Louis Gates writing in an article titled *The New Negro and the Black Image: From Booker T. Washington to Alain Locke* makes the following observation. "The New Negro...who have risen since the war, with education, refinement, and money. In marked contrast with their enslaved or disenfranchised ancestors, these New Negroes demanded that their rights as citizens be vouchsafed by law. Significantly, these New Negroes were to be recognized by their education..."¹⁶ Mordecai Johnson, the institutions inaugural black president, laid the foundation for its unofficial name of *The Black Mecca* and the so-called New Negro. Johnson would lead Howard University for thirty four years. During his tenure some of the greatest intellectuals served as faculty members, and Howard University became a significant influence pertinent to shaping black culture and intellectual life.

During Johnson's tenure at Howard University, he continued to preach in pulpits around America, and became recognized as one of the great orators of Black Preaching, a skill he perfected as the pastor of First Baptist Church in West Virginia from 1917 to 1926.

¹⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Terri Hume Oliver, *The Souls of Black Folk Centenary Edition*, (New York, Norton & Company, 1999), p.236.

¹⁶ Henry Louis gates, Jr., *The New Negro and the Black Image: From Booker T. Washington to Alain Locke*, Harvard University National Humanities Center
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/Test/ve/freedom/1917beyond/essays/newnegro.htm>

Illustrative of the indispensable relationship between black religion and black intellectualism, is the famous Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel at Howard University. “Over the decades, some of the most renowned and distinguished orators of the world have spoken in the Chapel...It was here that Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, the first African American president of Howard University, thundered his sermons against McCarthyism, racism, ignorance and squalor.”¹⁷ Historically, in Black America, religion and academia compliment one another. There is no sense of tension or schism between the two as institutions. One could walk into a classroom at Howard University and hear renowned scientist Dr. Charles Drew discuss blood transfusions, and then walk across campus to Rankin Memorial Chapel and hear black preaching. “This beautiful and historic building has been graced by...the most distinguished American preachers such as Vernon Johns, Martin Luther King, Jr., Samuel Proctor, Gardner Taylor, William Holmes Borders, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Howard Thurman.”¹⁸

The Black Church, coterminous with the Historically Black College and University, served as the architects of resistance and protest in America. It also provided a domain for black dignity and flourishing away from the slights and prejudices of White America.

Benjamin Elijah Mays served as one of those architects alongside of Mordecai Johnson in shaping the Black Religious landscape. Mays has often been cited as being the intellectual force behind the civil rights movement strategic decisions. Martin Luther King, Jr., referred to Mays as his spiritual mentor. Like Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin E. Mays was both an ordained baptist minister and the leader of the prestigious Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Mays was appointed as

¹⁷ Howard University Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel, *History And Legacy*, <https://chapel.howard.edu>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

the sixth president in 1940, and his tenure lasted until 1967, during which time he presided over significant growth both in terms of financial support, as well as prominence. Prior to his appointment as president of Morehouse College, Mays served as the Dean of the School of Religion at Howard University.

What is less appreciated and understood, is the role the black pulpit and black minister assumed in shaping the black college and university. The presidents of the schools were ministers. By extension then, the black pulpit helped to inform both the trajectory of black higher education, as well as the pedagogy of black higher education. Many of the historically black colleges and universities were founded as bible institutions. An example of this is Albany State University in Albany, Georgia, founded in 1903 as the Albany Bible and Manual Training Institute, by Joseph Winthrop Holley who himself aspired to be a minister, of which this researcher is an alumnus.

One of the final acts for the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the eulogy given by Benjamin E. Mays, as a fitting exclamation upon the intertwined nature of the pulpit and the academy. Where the pulpit ends and the academy begins in black religion is indistinguishable. The relationship between the two men was extensive and culminated only in death. Mays stated memorably; "No! He was not ahead of his time. No man is ahead of his time. Every man is within his star, each in his time."¹⁹

The Black Pulpit has been the locus of black resistance and the prophetic voice in America speaking from the margins. The greatest period in Black Religion, the magnum opus of the Black

¹⁹ Bates College, *April 1968: Benjamin Mays '20 delivers final eulogy for the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.*
<https://www.bates.edu>

Church, could serve as the blueprint to inform present and future generations of black leadership, in resisting oppression and racism in America. Black Lives Matter and other movements would do well to be instructed by their predecessors and their voices emanating from Black Religion.