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## The Middle-Class Religious Ideology and the Underclass Struggle: A Growing Divide in Black Religion

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The Middle-Class Religious Ideology and  
the Underclass Struggle: A Growing Divide in Black Religion

by

Franklin Hills, Jr.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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In Loving Memory of  
Franklin Hills, Sr. and LaBronx Hills

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**ABSTRACT**

The trajectory of religious phenomena has been to give a reflective, yet formative understanding of the ethos endemic to a culture. Pursuant to this thought, the ethos of African American religion can rightfully be described as a religious sociological construct, mired in a myriad of changes. These changes have had a profound effect on how African Americans relate to their God, their world, and themselves. The chief aim of this enterprise is to chronicle the transformation of Black Religion in the United States, noting the social and economic factors that served synergistically to formulate its current mission. I conclude that the advancements made during the Civil Rights Era have served as an impetus, within the past thirty years, that has resulted in a shift in the mission of Black Religion. I contend that this shift is away from the traditional communal appeal to a more individualistic appeal that substantiates middle-class African American religious ideology. I further contend that the rise of the African American middle-class religious ideology has contributed to the perpetual state of the African American underclass as illustrated in Black Religion. In undertaking this effort, I have drawn from an assortment of books and articles in addition to church literature, audio sermons, and personal interviews.

In establishing a premise for this argument, this thesis will explore the religious modus vivendi of early slaves. The Black Church was born out of the need to combat the atrocities and vicissitudes that were directly and indirectly a result of slavery. Slavery, therefore, provides a meaningful basis in which to begin to understand the embryonic stage of the church. After examining the formative years of Black Religion, I will then construct a cogent argument as to how the Civil Rights Movement employed Black Religion as a tool to empower the Black community, thus appealing to the community. I will then proceed to compare how Black Religion was employed during the Civil Rights Era to how it is employed presently. This comparison will provide the premise for my argument.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

One of the primary functions of African American religion throughout history has been to address and redress the grave malfeasances that plagued the Black community. Indeed, from slavery to the Civil Rights movement, past scholarship has defined Black Religion as the voice of protest for the Black community. This point has been noted in the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, an early scholar on Black life. In his prophetic and classic literary work on Black life, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E.B. Du Bois explicates how the Black Church served to stimulate congregants through social, intellectual, and economic uplift. Du Bois believed that “the Negro church” was “the social centre of Negro life in the United States.”<sup>1</sup> As the center of Black life during slavery, Black Religion became the voice of protest advocating the emancipation of the enslaved. Following emancipation, Black Religion became the voice of protest in that it became the thrust behind securing educational and employment opportunities for the Black community. For many ex-slaves, the church served as a launching pad to further their literacy and leadership skills. As Black Religion became more codified, it strengthened in its ability to produce social, political, and economic change within the Black community. During the twentieth century, Black Religion became a more unified institution. At this juncture, Black Religion was a well-organized

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*. (New York: Banton Books, 1903), .136.

institution with a secure economic base that produced educated leaders that fought for the social, political, and economic rights of its congregants.

Current scholarly discourse describes a quintessential element in Black Religion as a protest for liberation. The theme of liberation in Black Religion can be ascertained in the works of today's scholars. Author Olin P. Moyd, in his book, *Redemption in Black Theology*, describes liberation as Black America's struggle to overcome social, political, and economic oppression.<sup>2</sup> James H. Cone, one of today's leading scholars on Black life, posits that the liberation element in Black Religion is tantamount with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Cone maintains that the Black community identifies with Christ as a coheir in bondage. Just as Jesus was liberated from the bondage of this world, so too will the oppressed be set free from the worries and woes of this life.<sup>3</sup> No treatment of Black Religion can be contemplated without the groundbreaking research of C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya. Considered to be two of the most prophetic writers on Black Religion, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya proffer their view on liberation as it relates to Black Religion. Their view holds that liberation is one of the core values legitimated in the African American religious worldview. Lincoln and Mamiya view the African American religious worldview, or "Black sacred cosmos," as comprised of core values—racial parity, freedom, equality, and African heritage (among others), which was etched into existence by the

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<sup>2</sup> Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology*. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), 17.

<sup>3</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 5.



African heritage and Christianity.<sup>4</sup> There will be a further explanation of Lincoln and Mamiya's view on liberation and the Black sacred cosmos later in this study. Liberation has been the overarching theme in Black Religion, and it is within such parameters that Black Religion is being defined by today's scholars.

While current scholarship confines and defines Black Religion as a theoretical construct explicit to the reactions of a racist society, I conclude that Black Religion has changed from its reactionary, communal appeal and is moving towards a revolutionary, individualistic appeal which substantiates middle-class African American religious ideology. In light of the aforementioned, this study will attempt to answer the following question: Has the mission of Black Religion changed as a result of the Black middle-class religious ideology? If so, is the Black middle-class religious ideology perpetuating the state of the Black underclass as illustrated in Black Religion? Other points of interest that will be addressed in this study are: What is the Black middle-class religious ideology? Further, what social elements have led to its development?

The interpretive framework for this study will primarily be a sociological analysis that also relies upon economic data. Moreover, an historical overview of Black Religion will be presented as the treatment of this study seeks to understand certain developmental themes in Black Religion. The historical overview will, in part, sharply focus on the developments within Black Religion since the Civil Rights Movement. Consequently, the research data that will be considered will predominantly

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<sup>4</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.

date from the past thirty years. Further, I will examine the growth patterns of middle-class African American churches and the statistics of low socioeconomic African American churches to investigate how these churches relate to their surrounding communities. It is important to note that the phrase Black community is used throughout this study as a reference to geographical as well as sociological Black community. The source of my data will come from interviews I will conduct, texts provided in church literature, from audio sermons, and research data.

In their book, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya espouse that the Black Church is the “culture womb” of the Black community. Lincoln and Mamiya further postulate that Black Religion has always served as a multi-faceted institution engendering various levels of moral and practical support to its congregants.<sup>5</sup> While C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya’s view on the involvement of the Black Church in Black life is unarguably true, the influence of Black Religion on Black life has abated. The decline can be attributed to the legislative gains made during the sixties; the momentous gains of the sixties can also account for the changing dynamics in the Black community.

Since the days of Civil Rights Era, the social, economic, and geographical conditions of the Black community have changed drastically. These changes are profoundly affecting the role of the Black Church. This revolutionary phenomenon comes on the heels of a changing dynamic in the Black community.

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(London: Duke University Press, 1990), 7.

The Black community has been transformed from being corporate in nature, to its current status as a community comprised of individuals. The social, economic, and geographical division of middle-class Blacks and low income Blacks is indicative of this change. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya reference this point in their latest manuscript on Black Religion. Lincoln and Mamiya maintain that: "There is some evidence that the present and past central importance of the Black Church may be threatened by the virtual explosion of opportunities, which are now becoming available to recent Black college graduates."<sup>6</sup> As Lincoln and Mamiya's research indicate, there has been a vast amount of opportunities afforded to African Americans that has provided economic prosperity for some African Americans, thus creating an economic divide in Black America. This divide has created a dyadic role for the Black Church that caters to the individualistic appeal more so than the traditional communal appeal. More specifically, this shift detracts attention from the growing Black underclass and diverts it to the middle-class African American religious ideology, which I assert can be seen as detrimental to the Black underclass.

The term Black Religion is broad in scope and indeed can be referred to as a general category. As we begin our journey to understand the current mission of Black Religion, there must be a clarification of the word Black Religion. It is my intention here to employ the term Black Religion as a kind of sociological and theological reference to the Black Churches in the United

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. 383.

States. Generally speaking, any African American that attends a church can be included in the term Black Religion. However, for the sake of this study, the term Black Religion has been limited to include only independent, historic, and totally Black-controlled denominations which were founded during and after the days of slavery and catered to the core of Black Christians. These historical Black churches include the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church; the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Incorporated, NBCA; the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).

In defining Black Religion, chapter two will explore the contributions of early Africans' indigenous religious practices. As Africans arrived in the New World, they brought with them certain religious practices that were interwoven with Christian doctrine to formulate Black Religion. Chapter two will explore those basic African religious practices. Further, chapter two will explore how certain African religious practices, the institution of slavery, and Christianity led to the formation of the "invisible institution," which ultimately gave rise to Black Religion as a viable and vital religious institution.

Chapter three will further define Black Religion as it started to take form in the early days of slavery. There were two distinctive qualities of the early Black Church: the redemptive quality and the political quality. Early Africans had a strong belief in Christian redemption. They believed that just as Christ was redeemed from unearned suffering, they too would be

redeemed; for the Africans felt that, akin to Jesus, they were suffering unjustly and that their unearned suffering is redemptive. In addition to the redemptive quality, chapter three will explore the political quality of the early churches. The early churches were political in that they provided spiritual leaders who spoke and eventually led protests to abolish the institution of slavery. Chapter three will also explore the empirical characteristics of these two qualities.

Chapter four will weigh the impact of the Civil Rights Era. During the sixties there were many legislative gains for African Americans. Many civil rights organizations and leaders were responsible for social, political, and economic advancements made during the sixties. However, one individual in particular, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had a profound effect on the Civil Rights Movement and on the Black Church. Chapter four will explore his contribution and impact on the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Church.

The chapter five will examine the progress that was made as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. The progress gained during the Civil Rights Movement reduced the equality gap that separated African Americans and their white counterparts. As a segment of the African American populace ascended the social and economic ladder, a social and economic divide appeared. Chapter five will explore the impact of this phenomenon. Moreover, Chapter five will elucidate the impact this social and economic

division has had on the Black community and on the Black Church and how this division has divided the mission of the Black Church.

“A good way to understand a people is to study their religion, for religion is addressed to that most sacred schedule of values around which the expression and the meaning of life tends to coalesce.”—C. Eric Lincoln

## **Chapter Two**

### **What Is Black Religion?**

It may be possible, for heuristic purposes, to analyze the human relationship to the world in purely individual terms; however, the empirical reality of human interaction is always a social one. No individual is an island to himself [herself]; collectively humans shape tools, develop languages, adhere to values, devise institutions, and so forth. The individual is, therefore, forever interdependent upon, and must in some manner interact with, the collective. As it relates to religion, this fact is unequivocally true, as socialization is a primary function of religion. One of the greatest characteristics of religious phenomena is that they seek to establish communality by uniting the individual with the collective. This socializing aspect of religion oftentimes affords reflective insight into a particular culture. This fact is particularly true in regard to the African American culture. Pursuant to this thought, Black Religion attempts to explicate how African Americans relate to themselves, the world around them, and their God.

There were three major factors that contributed to the formation of Black Religion: the African Religious experience, the institution of slavery, and the influence of Christianity. As I begin my efforts to define Black Religion, I will begin with the examination of the impact of African religion, as it would be a grave academic injustice if one made an attempt to understand Black Religion

without the influence or impact of the African religion. To be sure, African religion had a significant impact on African American religion. On the vast continent of Africa, there are many societies and cultures with a plethora of religious practices. Of the many African religious practices, there were certain underpinning religious elements that were transplanted on American soil and fused with Christianity. The slaves sent to America were seized from all parts of Africa—South, Central, East, and West. However, a large percentage of slaves were extracted from West Africa and the Congo-Angola region, home to the Mandinke, Yoruba, Ibo, and Bakongo cultures. Of this region, one central element categorizing the African religion was their belief in an ultimate god. As within Christian doctrine, this ultimate being was an omniscient creator who held power, oversaw justice, and granted eternal life. However, in African religion, often the ultimate god is the parent of other gods considered to be intercessors between god and man. This point is illustrated in the Yoruba culture. For the Yoruba society, Olurum is viewed as being above all other gods. A sacrifice to any of the other gods is to be offered in his name.<sup>7</sup> Viewed as the final authority, this ultimate god constitutes the beginning and the end, breathing and non-breathing, punishment and reward, life and death.

Spirit possession is another significant African religious practice that was passed on to African American religion. Spirit possession was evoked in many ways in African religion; one way was through the priest. Acting as an intermediary during a ritual ceremony, the priest or devotee enters into ecstatic

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<sup>7</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 9.



states, or “spirit possession.” During this ecstatic state, the devotee dances or acts out the character of the god, becoming the “god’s mouthpiece.”<sup>8</sup> Fellow participants clap their hands, leap into the air and move in a circular motion. During worship, slaves experienced similar accounts. Mose Hursey, a slave, recalls:

On Sundays they had meetin’, sometimes at our house, sometimes at ‘nother house....they’d preach and pray and sing—shout, too. I heard them get up with a powerful force of the spirit, clappin’ they hands and walkin’ around the place. They’d shout, ‘I got the glory. I got that old time ‘ligion in my heart.’ I seen some powerful ‘figuratio of the spirit in them days.<sup>9</sup>

Much like the spirit accounts noted in West Africa, slaves have cited similar experiences in America. These similarities give much credence to the fact that African religious practices were, indeed, transplanted to America.

Africans also carried over music to the new world as an important element from their African religious practices. Singing, dancing, and drumming are all intricately woven into African Religion. For example, among the Fon culture, the devotee responds to songs and drums while engaged in a revelatory dance to his [her] god.<sup>10</sup> Through this ritual, the devotee becomes spirit possessed, paying homage to his [her] gods and ancestors. Olmsted, a planter who observed Africans in worship, describes the process: “It was explained to me that it is their custom, in social worship, to work themselves up to a great pitch of excitement,

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<sup>8</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

in which they yell and cry aloud, and finally shriek and leap up, clapping their hands and dancing, as it is done at heathen festivals.”<sup>11</sup>

African religion does not separate the sacred from the secular. Worship is an intricate part of African life. Gods are personified as well as personalized, present in the lives of men and women on every level—environmental, individual, social, national, and cosmic. In the Ibo culture, the god Chineke controls rain and fertility. From him the *chi*, or soul of a man, originates. Much like the religious practices in Congo-Angola, Dahomey, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, and Togo, religion permeates every aspect of African life, and much like the enslaved African, religion is a unique thread intricately woven in the fabric of African life. Albert J. Raboteau summarized it best: “One of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the slave’s culture, linking African past with American present, was his religion.”<sup>12</sup> As this study illustrates, several elements from the African indigenous religion can be cited in African American slave religion.

The religious milieu of the American slave was a system of African religious practices that were passed down through time to first generation slaves. These practices made no distinction between the natural and supernatural or the sacred and the secular. Adopted and modified by first generation slaves, these practices were then fused with Christianity to formulate what is now known as Black Religion. Further, African religion oriented the descendants of slaves to the

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<sup>11</sup> William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*. (London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 26.

<sup>12</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 4.

New World; it gave the newly enslaved a unique religious perspective and a foundation upon which Christianity was built. In Dwight N. Hopkins' opinion: "aspects of African indigenous religions acted as a key ingredient for the creation of and constitution of the Black self in the United States. Black folk in America did not begin in slavery; they began in West Africa."<sup>13</sup>

As Africans became familiar with Christianity, slaves started holding secret meetings to encourage one another through spiritual uplift. Slaves would meet in discrete settings—woods, gullies, ravines, thickets—often referred to as "hush harbors." The White masters did not approve of slaves congregating in the name of religion, as they feared such meetings would result in a slave revolt. Henry Bibb was threatened with five hundred lashes for attending a prayer meeting conducted by a slave. Gus Clark, another slave, reported: "My Boss didn' 'low us to go to church, er to pray er sing. Iffen he ketched us prayin' er singin' he whupped us...He didn' care fer nothin' 'cept farmin."<sup>14</sup> Despite the danger, slaves continued to meet secretly in what is called the "invisible institution." As Moses Grandy stated, "they like their own meeting better."<sup>15</sup> At their [slave] meetings, slaves were able to sing, pray, and relate to one another's sorrows. These meetings were significant in that they provided the opportunity for African and Christian religious practices to blend together. More importantly, these meetings paved the way for the "invisible institution" to become a vital and viable religious institution.

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<sup>13</sup> Dwight Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over Slave Religion and Black Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 113.

<sup>14</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 214.

As briefly explained, African religion greatly influenced Black Religion. Slavery was the second force that had a vast impact on the creation of Black Religion. As the South thrived under the system of slavery, the Great Awakening of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries ushered in a religious vigor. At this juncture, the “invisible institution” Frazier so rightfully termed was well established. Drawing from this informal religious institution, the Baptist and Methodist denominations appealed to the emotional and ecstatic needs of the slaves. This appeal created much religious enthusiasm among the slave population. Moreover, this religious enthusiasm was clearly embraced by African slaves and can be cited in church membership. Methodist church records reflect that in 1786, Black membership hovered around 1,890. By 1797, the Black members soared to 11,682.<sup>16</sup> As religious activity among slaves surged, a corresponding increase in Black membership transpired. The increase in Black membership brought about discriminatory practices on the part of Whites. Such was the case with Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in Philadelphia. Allen and Jones, along with other Black parishioners, were kneeling in prayer at St. George Methodist Church in Philadelphia, when they were asked to move. When they decided to remain in prayer Allen, Jones, and the other parishioners were dragged out of the sanctuary by white officials.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, Allen and Jones withdrew from St. George signaling the first step towards a Black independent church in Philadelphia.

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<sup>15</sup> Raboteau., *Slave Religion*, 215.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Under similar circumstances, the first Black Baptist Church in America was established. In 1750 in South Carolina, under the leadership of George Liele, the Silver Bluff Baptist Church was established. Following the establishment of the Silver Bluff Baptist Church, the African Baptist, or “Blue Stone” church, was founded in Mecklenburg, Virginia, in 1758. Other independent Black Baptist churches formed, such as the Springfield Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia, organized in 1787 under the leadership of Jesse Peters. There were other independent Black Baptist churches that were established throughout Northern and Southern cities in such places as Williamsburg, Richmond, Petersburg, and Virginia.<sup>18</sup>

The establishment of independent Black Baptist churches ultimately led to the formation of self-governing Black interdenominational organizations. The first of these organizations was the Providence Association of Ohio, which was established in 1834. Union Association followed with an establishment date of 1836; the Wood River Association was established shortly thereafter in Illinois in 1839. In 1844, the Wood River Association organized the Colored Baptist Home Missionary Society, which led to the formation of the Western Colored Baptist Convention (WCBC) in 1853. In 1864, the WCBC was reformed as the Northwestern and Southern Baptist Convention, and later merged with the American Baptist Missionary Convention to become the Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention. It held its first meeting in August of 1867, with

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<sup>17</sup> William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*. (London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 8.

100,000 members. In subsequent years, this organization divided into three separate organizations: the Baptist Foreign Missionary Convention of the United States of America, the American National Baptist Convention, and the National Baptist Educational Convention of the United States of America. This split resulted in the establishment of the National Baptist Convention, USA. In Atlanta, on September 28th, 1895, the National Baptist Convention, USA, was formed with Reverend E.C. Morris as president elect.<sup>19</sup>

The establishment of the National Baptist Convention, USA, is cemented in the historical formation of the first separate, independent African Baptist church. As racism played a pivotal role in its establishment, the Baptist denomination catered to psychological, spiritual, and cultural needs of Black slaves. Slaves were attracted to the Baptist denomination and made it one of the primary religious denominations. As the Baptist denomination grew to formulate the National Baptist Convention, USA, there was a schism that resulted in the formation of the National Baptist Convention of America and the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Incorporated, which continued to be dedicated to Black Baptist adherents. Prior the formation of the National Baptist Convention of America and the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Incorporated, the National Baptist Convention, USA represented nearly 3 million parishioners in over 20,000 local churches.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (London: Duke University Press), 1990, .24.

<sup>19</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

The National Baptist Convention of America formed as an offspring of the National Baptist Convention, USA. In 1915, the National Baptist Convention of America was established. Publishing concerns were cited as the primary reasoning behind the split. The National Baptist Convention of America is the second largest of the three Baptist Convention organizations. In 1989, the National Baptist Convention of America reported a membership of 2.4 million. Its programs include home missions, foreign missions, Baptist training, National Baptist Publishing, evangelical work, charity work, and educational projects.<sup>21</sup>

The Progressive National Baptist Convention, Incorporated, was established in 1961. There were differences centered on election issues and social change strategies. Upon resolving these issues, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc., was formed as a separate entity from its mother organization, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. The first meeting was held in Philadelphia and the focus was the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, Black Political Development, Economic Development, Education, Job Training, and Strengthening the Black Family; it is the smallest of the three Baptist conventions. As of 1989, it has 1,000 clergy with a membership of 1.2 million.<sup>22</sup>

The second denomination that gained popularity among African American slaves and helped establish Black Religion in America was the Methodist denomination. The first Black Methodist Church has a similar origin to that of the Black Baptist church. Free Blacks in the North organized a separate Methodist

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

Church due to stultifying and demeaning treatment by White members. White Methodist leaders were, as Lincoln and Mamiya state, “instruments of the political and social policies that supported slavery.”<sup>23</sup> The origin of independent Black Methodist churches can be traced back to Richard Allen. In April 1787, Allen instituted the Free African Society, which on July 17, 1794, gave rise to St. Thomas African Episcopal Church and subsequently to the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1816. The move on Allen’s behalf to establish these two religious institutions signaled a movement for African Americans to create their own separate, independent Black Methodist religious institutions.<sup>24</sup> The African Methodist Episcopal Church grew rapidly; within two years, church membership grew from 1,000 to 7,000. The African Methodist Episcopal Church as of 1989 is the largest of the Black Methodist communions, with a membership of 2.2 million.<sup>25</sup>

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church also originated in the late eighteenth century. In 1796, Black members separated from the John Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City as result of discriminatory practices on the part of White members. White members refused to allow full ordination of Black preachers and did not allow Black preachers to attend their conference. In 1801, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was established. In October of 1820, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>24</sup> W. D. Weatherford, *American Churches And The Negro*. (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1957), 37.

<sup>25</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (London: Duke University Press, 1990), 54.



and the Asbury African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was established in 1816, adopted their own discipline and commonly accepted that date as the official beginning of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination.<sup>26</sup> In 1821, the church numbered 1,400 members and 22 preachers; these figures increased in 1860 to 4,600 and 105, respectively. Currently, the A.M. E. Zion is the second largest of the Black Methodist denominations; as of 1989, its membership exceeded 1.2 million members.<sup>27</sup>

The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church has post-slavery origins. Established on December 15, 1870, it was originally called the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America. However, the “Colored” was replaced with “Christian” in 1954 to have a racially inclusive appeal. The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church split with the Methodist Episcopal Church over the amicable standpoint that Black members want a church established by and for themselves, with their own ideas and notions. The church was established in 1870. By 1890, membership exceeded 103,000. It is the smallest of the three Methodist organizations. As of 1989, its national constituencies have a membership exceeding 900,000 with 3,000 churches and a national budget of 3 million dollars.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike the Black Baptist and Methodist churches, Black Pentecostals began from a Black-initiated movement. The modern Pentecostal movement dates back to 1906, under the leadership of William Seymour. The movement

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<sup>26</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 57.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

can be traced back to the Azusa Street Revival held in Los Angeles. The Pentecostal movement, as led by Seymour, involved both Blacks and Whites. As the movement progressed, Whites withdrew and a divergence between Black and White doctrinal practices transpired. The Church of God in Christ has over 3.5 million members and is the largest Pentecostal group from the Holiness movement.<sup>29</sup>

Black Religion, as noted in the seven major Black denominations, was born out of the stultifying and demeaning actions of white members. As a result of the discriminatory practices of White congregants, Black Religion became separate and independent of European Christianity. The tenets of Black Religion were therefore designed as a result of protest and survival of the enslaved. In providing for the survival of the enslaved, Black Religion extends beyond the parameters of religion to include social, political, economic, and cultural concerns. Black Religion carried social implications because it was a vehicle of freedom, first for the Black preacher, and secondly, for the enslaved masses. History is replete with examples of how preachers prior to the Civil War gained their freedom through religious means. Such was the case with Josiah Bishop, who preached to a mixed audience in Portsmouth in 1795, and was later given money by his congregation to purchase his freedom.<sup>30</sup> Black Religion carried social implications in the founding of early church associations such as the Wood River Association, instituted in 1839. Such associations were instruments in the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>30</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 4.

freedom of the enslaved masses in that they were advocates for the abolitionist movement and were active in the Underground Railroad.<sup>31</sup> The political implication of Black Religion can be noted in the right of the enslaved African to call on God for deliverance from the evil of slavery and the right of self-determination. In many cases, slaves would petition God to deliver them from their earthly plight. Such was the case with Bill Collins. As a slave, Bill Collins recalls petitioning his right for self-determination: "On Sunday we would go to the barn and pray to God to fix some way for us to be freed from our mean master."<sup>32</sup> As demonstrated in Bill Collins' comment, slaves would petition God to be raised out of the abject misery of slavery.

Christianity was the last major ingredient in the composition of Black Religion. As Christianity was fused with African religious practices and the institution of slavery, five major themes arose as the basis for Black Religion. The first of these themes is freedom. The basic principle of freedom can be noted throughout the history of the Black Church. Whether it took on a literal meaning, as in the days of slavery, or a figurative one, as in the freedom to pursue certain rights, freedom has been one of the most basic elements in Black Religion. As history can attest, the implication of the word freedom is derived from exigency. During slavery, freedom meant freedom from physical bondage; after the emancipation of slavery, it meant freedom to explore employment and educational opportunities; in the twentieth century, freedom meant social,

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<sup>31</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (London: Duke University Press, 1990), 26.

political, and economic justice. Freedom for the African American has always meant the absence of physical and spiritual restraint and the freedom to be all that God intended one to be.

In addition to freedom, unity is another theme that is greatly emphasized in Black Religion. Since the formation of Black Religion, unity has been one of its most critical elements. The Church was an integral function of the slave community through which they found spiritual strength by meeting together. For example, Carey Davenport, a slave who lived in Walker County, Texas, found fellowship and spiritual strength while meeting other slaves in the brush arbors (or "hush arbors") of Walker County. In *The Negro Church in America*, E. Franklin Frazier references this point: "In the emotionalism of the camp meetings and revivals some social solidarity, even if temporary, was achieved, and they were drawn into an union with their fellow men . . . religious beliefs and practices and traditions tended to provide a new basis of social cohesion in an alien environment."<sup>32</sup> William Montgomery also makes mention of how slaves found cohesion in church meetings. Montgomery notes that: "In congregations, class meetings, and missions, converted Christians bonded together in a community, caring for and helping each other live according to God's will through discipline and prayer."<sup>33</sup> Black Religion, to a degree, still unifies the Black community. Whenever tragedy strikes the Black community, the Black Church becomes the focal point and unity becomes the theme of the day. Once the Black community

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<sup>32</sup> Dwight Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over Slave Religion and Black Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 139.

<sup>33</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 2.

unifies, protest becomes a tool. This point was illustrated in the 1991 Rodney King incident. During this ordeal, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, along with other preachers and civic leaders, bound the nation together on one accord to protest the brutal treatment of Rodney King.

The principle of protest has always been a tool of the Black Church. The very establishment of the Black Church as a separate, independent institution can be viewed as an act of protest. In 1809, protesters urged Moses, a Black preacher, and his entire congregation in Williamsburg, Virginia, to hold church services protesting against a local white association's meeting policies.<sup>35</sup> In many instances, the Black Church was used as a meeting place to plan strategies for protest. As Olin P. Boyd notes, it was a place where "Black people met to organize their economic enterprises, to plan their political strategies, and to design their programs of protest against social injustices."<sup>36</sup> Such was the case in December of 1955, when the organizers of the Bus Boycott utilized the basement of the Dexter Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, to formulate strategies for their boycott. The principle of protest climaxed during the Civil Rights Era and is probably the most recognizable example of how Black Religion was used as a tool for protest. Thomas K. Grose of *U.S. News and World Report* wrote of how the protest principle indelibly changed race relations

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<sup>34</sup> William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*. (London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 21.

<sup>35</sup> W. D. Weatherford, *American Churches And The Negro*. (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1957), 121.

<sup>36</sup> Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology*. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), 16.

in the United States by urging President Lyndon B. Johnson in July of 1964, to sign the Civil Rights Bill into law.<sup>37</sup>

Equality is another core principle in Black Religion. In protesting for “equality” or “equal rights,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, evoked the Declaration of Independence citing that “all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with inalienable rights.” The fight for equality was paramount during the Civil Rights Era and was brought into focus as the famous *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court case of 1954 demanded that the nation revisit its principles regarding equality.

Among the core elements in Black Religion, spirituality stands to be the most important. Spirituality, which is endemic to the African culture, predisposed the African to the spiritual element of Black Religion. Indeed, much like the Akan society in Ghana, spirituality governed all of human interaction and the environment. Religion, for the Akan culture, was an intertwining of the spirit world, society, nature, and humanity.<sup>38</sup> Akin to the spirituality of the African, their enslavement fused spirituality in every aspect of life. In *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900* William E. Montgomery gives his thoughts on spirituality in slave religion: “As had been true for their African ancestors, folk worship brought them into contact with the spirit world, an experience that was understandably joyous and exciting in comparison

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas K. Grose, “Toward Equality For All,” *U.S. News & World News*, 22 September 2003, 70.

<sup>38</sup> Dwight Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over Slave Religion and Black Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 111.

to the drabness of their daily lives.”<sup>39</sup> These core elements—freedom, spirituality, protest, unity, and equality—although present in Christianity, took on a new meaning, reverberating throughout the Black community with profound implications. Moreover, these core elements have established Black Religion distinctively apart from all other religions.

Historically, these five core themes have played a critical role in Black Religion; they have helped to define Black Religion. However, the social and economic dynamics of the Black experience has changed drastically in the past thirty years. Since the Civil Rights Era, the African American experience can rightfully be described as divided along social and economic lines. This “‘nation’ within a nation” has fractured into two groups: the quasi-affluent bourgeois middle-class and the poor underclass. As these two classes become more established, the core principles of Black Religion must be redefined to accommodate the growing division between the Black underclass and the Black middle-class. More importantly, this social and economic divide in Black America has created a unique and complex phenomenon within the Black experience, which has obscured the mission of Black Religion. Consequently, scholars vary on their perspectives of Black Religion. A scholar on Black life, Anthony Pinn, describes Black Religion as centered around suffering and attempting to address poignant questions regarding theodicy.<sup>40</sup> Olin P. Moyd speaks of Black religion as a redemptive quality. Dwight N. Hopkins discusses Black Theology as it

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<sup>39</sup> William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*. (London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 267.

relates to theological liberation, drawing from the religious experience of the enslaved African American. In Hopkins' view, "Black Theology results from reflection on the Spirit's will of liberation revealed in various expressions of black folks' faith and practice within the context of Protestantism, American culture, and slave religion."<sup>41</sup> In a similar vein, James Cones posits that the overarching purpose of Black Religion is centered on liberation. His thoughts rest in the fact that America unjustly mistreats the African American and he calls on the church and the prophetic role of the preacher to rectify this injustice.<sup>42</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore maintains that Black Religion is the radical thrust of the Black people for human liberation expressed in theological terms and religious institutions. He thus refers to Black Religion as Black Radicalism. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, two of the most profound writers on Black life, view Black Religion in terms of a "dialectical model," which defines the Black Churches as institutions that are along a continuum of six major dialectal polarities. The dialectical model of polar opposites includes priestly and prophetic; other-worldly and this worldly; universalism and particularism; communal and privatistic; charismatic and bureaucratic; and resistance and accommodation.<sup>43</sup> These various viewpoints on Black Religion are indicative of the fact that there is no consensual definition of Black Religion. However, the quintessential element on which all these

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<sup>40</sup> Anthony P. Pinn, Edt. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*. (Ft. Myers: University Press of Florida, 2002), 3-4.

<sup>41</sup> Dwight Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over Slave Religion and Black Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), VII.

<sup>42</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 5.

<sup>43</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (London: Duke University Press, 1990), 17



scholars would agree is that Black Religion is inextricably bound to the Black experience.

Depending upon the historical context, Black Religion has assumed various missions within the Black community. This fact has been evident since the beginning of slavery. For the enslaved, Black Religion was a source of inner strength, a mechanism that elevated their souls and spirits out of the sinking sands of human degradation. During the Civil Rights Era, Black Religion was employed as a tool to combat racism and oppression. For African Americans in the twenty-first century, Black Religion is now at a crossroads and is undergoing a change according to the social, economic, and demographical changing needs of its adherents.

Many African Americans no longer see themselves as subjects of racism and oppression. Consequently, there has been a large shift away from the treatment of society's ills such as racism, oppression, and integration. Civil Rights legislation has brought about social and economic freedoms that were not afforded to African Americans in the past. These new freedoms have had a profound effect on the African American community. These effects on the African American community have, in turn, changed the mission of Black Religion. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya reference this point when they speak of the new challenge facing the Black Church as a result of the growing social and economic divide within Black America: "The gradual emergence of two fairly distinct Black Americas along class lines—of two nations within a nation—has

raised a serious challenge to the Black Church.”<sup>44</sup> In their research, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya touch upon the fact that there is, indeed, a growing social and economic divide within Black America and the Black Church faces a dilemma in meeting the needs of both.

The mission of Black Religion has varied, depending upon the context within history. This variation signals a shift along the continuum of core principles which address and satisfy the needs of the Black community. Black Religion can therefore be viewed as a theological construct influenced by the perpetual change in the social dynamics explicit to the African American community. In the next chapter, I will further establish this contention by examining the political and redemptive quality of Black Religion, which I consider to be two principles that represent the spiritual and protest value of Black Religion along the continuum.

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<sup>44</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience.*, 384.

My Lord delivered, poo' Daniel, My Lord delivered, poo' Daniel  
And I know He'll deliver poo' me.—Slave Spiritual

## **Chapter Three**

### **An Historical Overview: The Origin and Development of Black Religion**

#### **The Redemptive Quality of Black Religion**

Any scholar who wishes to have an in-depth understanding of Black Religion, including its formation and contribution to the Black experience, must seriously weigh the historical framework upon which it rested. The advent of slavery supplanted the African and ultimately led to his cultural disembowelment. It began with the trans-Atlantic voyage. During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, millions of Africans were forced to abandon their indigenous cultural practices. For many Africans, the voyage to the Americas was filled with unspeakable fear and unbearable conditions, which led to disease and death. However, for those Africans who survived the voyage across the Atlantic, a new world awaited them. By the nineteenth century, there were almost one million slaves in the United States, and by 1869, there were roughly two million ex-slaves working in the cotton and rice industries as well as in other economic ventures.<sup>45</sup> As ex-slaves sought relief from their dehumanizing circumstances, Christianity became the dominant religion among Africans.

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<sup>45</sup> Anthony P. Pinn, Edt. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*. (Ft. Myers: University Press of Florida, 2002), 4.

The fusion of slavery and Christianity had profound consequences. For many Africans, Christianity became the symbol of hope and deliverance from the evil, oppressive forces that consumed their existence. Africans interest in Christianity rose significantly during Reconstruction. During the era of Reconstruction, Christianity became an organized and independent institution on a massive scale. It was during “the formative years,” as Olin P. Moyd terms it, that Black Religion became a viable institution.<sup>46</sup> Slaves started assembling secretly late at night in meeting camps to discuss their plight. During this time, there was a surge in interest in Black Religion. From 1860 to 1880 there was an increase of two hundred percent in the Black Christian populace. The aforementioned statistic represents a boost in the Black Christian population from 300,000 to more than 900,000 during this period.<sup>47</sup> As Black Religion became an established institution, there was a departure from the European theological line of thought. Black Religion developed its own line of thought which included the reinterpretation of the “servant, obey your master” construct. Christianity advocating the submissive slave was, for the most part, reinterpreted through a redemptive theme, which is evident in many of the songs, prayers, and sermons of the Black Church. For example, the redemptive theme can be clearly cited in the Negro spirituals such as, “It is no secret what God will do, for what He has done for others He will do for you.”<sup>48</sup> In this classic Negro hymn, it is expressed that just as God delivered other biblical figures from their lot, He will also deliver

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<sup>46</sup> Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology*.(Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), 74.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

you from your earthly woes. The redemption theme can also be cited in the early sermons of abolitionist thinkers, such as Absalom Jones. Addressing the St. Thomas Church in Philadelphia back on January 1, 1808, Jones evoked the story of the Children of Israel. He addresses both moral evil and African American suffering, noting, “God is not blind to the misery of African Americans ...and that God works on behalf of the oppressed.”<sup>49</sup> Jones draws from Exodus 3: 7 and 8 which states: “And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrow; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians”.<sup>50</sup>

Redemption in European Christianity differs in its implications in Black Religion. As Moyd points out, Western theology developed in the midst of colonization. During this period, Moyd asserts, states were superior to the church and “thus the church has been passive in the area of developing a theology that would be antagonistic to the social, economic, and political practices of the state.”<sup>51</sup> Redemption in European Christianity implies salvation from sin and guilt. This differs from Black Religion in that Black Religion postulates forgiveness from oppression, sin, and guilt. Moreover, Black Religion’s interpretation of redemption closely mirrors the Hebrews’ definition of redemption. Much like the Hebrews’ definition, Black Religion denotes redemption as salvation from the state or circumstance that destroys the value of

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<sup>49</sup> Anthony P. Pinn, Edt. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*. (Ft. Myers: University Press of Florida, 2002), 37.

<sup>50</sup> Exodus 3:7-8.

one's existence or one's existence itself. Deuteronomy 7:8 lends credence to this contention: "But it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt." Such scriptures encouraged slaves that "trouble don't last always." As illustrated, redemption in Hebrew thought implies salvation from the present entrapment of earthly woes and physical and spiritual oppression. In light of this thought, the quintessential factor in Black Religion is that Jesus is partial to the poor and the oppressed because Jesus is with those enchained by poverty and oppression. Harriet Gresham, an ex-slave from Florida, recalls a song which spoke of Jesus as the divine ruler of heaven and earth and who detests the conditions of the poor and oppressed:

T'ank ye Marster Jesus, t'ank ye  
T'ank ye Marster Jesus, t'anke ye  
T'ank ye Marster Jesus, t'anke ye  
Da Heben gwinter be my home.  
No slav'ry chains to tie me down,  
And no mo dirver's ho'n to blow fer me  
No mo' stock to faster me down  
Jesus break slav'ry chain, Lord  
Break slav'ry chain Lord  
Break slav'ry chain Lord  
Da Heben gwinter be my home.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), 40.

<sup>52</sup> Dwight Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over Slave Religion and Black Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 218.

In Christian thought, Jesus detested the oppression of the poor. Mathew 11:28, 30 supports this contention: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."<sup>53</sup> Throughout Black Religion this intransigent concept has been the "solid rock" that has sustained African Americans. Moreover, in European theology, Christ Jesus was given the name Emmanuel, which is translated as "the spirit with us." In light of this fact, African slaves believed that their oppressive conditions were transitory, and just as Jesus had experienced persecution and was delivered out of the hand of evil they, too, would somehow be rescued from the atrocities of slavery. These sentiments echoed in the minds of many slaves. Anderson Edwards, from his memoir about slavery, recalls the following:

We prayed a lot to be free and the Lord done heered us. We didn't have no song books and the Lord done give us our songs and when we sing them at night it jus' whispering so nobody hear us. One went like this.

My knee bones am aching  
My body's rackin' with pain,  
I' lieve I'm a chile of God,  
And this ain't my home,  
'Cause Heaven's my aim.<sup>54</sup>

The thoughts of freedom in Christ rang in the hearts and minds of many slaves, and as the physical and spiritual burden of slavery consumed their existence,

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<sup>53</sup> Mathew 11:28.

<sup>54</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 218.

freedom in Christ became their refuge. This line of thought is discussed in Anthony B. Pinn's *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*.<sup>55</sup> He writes that, "slaves perceived in their own experience the paradox of the Gospel, the redemptive power of Christ's suffering, repeated once again in the patterns of their own lives."<sup>56</sup> Pinn goes on to note that this historical response to moral evil can be categorized into two themes. The first theme is that suffering has redemptive benefits because it is pedagogical in nature; and the second theme states that suffering has redemptive benefits because it is punitive in nature and this punishment is deserved.<sup>57</sup> Both doctrines embody the thought that God is loving, kind, just, compassionate, righteous, and concerned about humanity. Furthermore, both doctrines espouse the thought that salvation consists of reuniting with God in a teleological sense; that is to say that history develops towards a certain outcome, with the divine reigning as supreme. The following scriptures illustrate Pinn's point regarding God favoring the oppressed and poor:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
Because he has anointed me  
To bring good news to the poor,  
God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To let the oppressed go free,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.  
Luke 4:18-19

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<sup>55</sup> Pinn rejects the notion of redemptive suffering; however, in dispelling the theory of redemptive suffering, Pinn elucidates several points that lend credence to my argument.

<sup>56</sup> Anthony P. Pinn, Edt. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*. (Ft. Myers: University Press of Florida, 2002), 14.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



As the scriptures suggest, Jesus' purpose embodies a paradigm of servanthood for the poor and outcast. Many slaves looked upon Jesus not as a spiritual entity that simply came into the world for them, but as an entity that called upon them to work with the Spirit of liberation so that they might be with Him. Romans 6:8 – 13 best illustrates this point. It states that whoever dies with Christ will rise with Him in the Kingdom of Heaven.

As enslaved Africans sought deliverance from their earthly plight, redemption became a paramount theme in Black Religion. Through song and personal testimony, it was evidenced that Africans sought redemption through religious means. Mingo White, a slave thirsting after freedom, once uttered the words: "Somehow or yuther us had an instinct dat we was goin' to be free," and "when de day's wuk was done de slaves would be foun' ...in dere cabins prayin; for de Lawd to free dem lack he did chillum of Is'ael."<sup>58</sup> In other instances, slaves sang songs with freedom deeply rooted in their context. Harriet Jacobs describes how slaves escaped slavery through spiritual uplifting. Slaves often sang songs that had deep overtones of freedom in the lyrics:

Ole Satan thought he had a mighty aim:  
He missed my soul, and caught my sin.  
Cry Amen, cry amen, cry amen to God!  
He took my sins upon his back:  
Went muttering and grumbling down to hell.  
Cry Amen, cry amen, cry amen to God!  
Ole Satan's church is here below.  
Up to God's free church I hope to go.

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<sup>58</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 219.

Cry amen, cry amen, cry amen to God! <sup>59</sup>

As slaves sought deliverance from their earthly lot, spiritual redemption became paramount. As demonstrated through song, prayer, sermons, and testimonies, redemption is the core motif in Black folks' aspirations and expressions.

### **The Political Quality of Early Black Religion**

The formation and development of Black political leaders can be traced back to Black Religion. Although social control of Africans was well in place through legal means, the church became the primary institution through which slaves experienced freedom. For religious purposes, slaves would meet in the bayous of the Southern plantations, or meet clandestinely in the slave quarters. It was during these meetings that Africans would oftentimes develop their own leaders. For example, Nat Turner, in 1831, led a slave uprising which resulted in a number of White casualties. Similarly, Denmark Vesey, just nine years prior, in 1822, led a slave revolt. David Walker was yet another individual who was responsible for political activism during this time. David Walker raised the Black consciousness of the African Americans during his day. He did so, in part, by evoking the thought that God is Black. In the antislavery *Appeal* of 1829, David Walker advocated the phrase "God of the Ethiopians."<sup>60</sup> Turner, Vesey, and Walker are examples of how the Black Church produced leaders in the slave community. For many slaves, the church was the only viable means from which

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<sup>59</sup> Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. (London, England: Harvard University Press, 1987), 71.

to develop any type of educational, political, or leadership ability. During the several centuries of slavery, political, educational, economic, social, and cultural institutions were, for the most part, illegal, and in many cases underdeveloped. As the church became, as W.E. B. Dubois has termed it, “the centrality of the Black community,”<sup>61</sup> Black Religion became a survival mechanism for the enslaved.

The fact that Africans employed religion as a means of survival carries political implications. Surviving the dehumanizing aspects of slavery, as many Africans did, preserved their sense of manhood and womanhood. This fact served as a prerequisite to political activity in the Black Church. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya comment on this phenomenon: “After the period of slavery when more political options were possible, the survival tradition among Blacks became largely a pre-political condition, but one with political potential.”<sup>62</sup> By surviving the cruelties of slavery, Africans provided the potential to produce political leaders and activity for future generations. For example, during Reconstruction, Dr. William Simmons, a Black clergyman, became a county clerk, county commissioner, and chairman of the county campaign committee in Florida. Other examples include Reverend Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who, in 1870, became the first Black citizen and the first Black senator elected to

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<sup>60</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (London: Duke University Press, 1990), 177.

<sup>61</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1903), 136.

<sup>62</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 202.

Congress.<sup>63</sup> The aforementioned individuals all represent how Africans endured and persevered under the atrocities of slavery and afterward, achieved social and political prominence in their respected communities.

Most major Black Church denominations were rooted in anti-slavery or anti-discrimination rhetoric. As Gayraud Wilmore has stated, “the Gospel taught, received, and practiced is as anti-slavery as it is anti-sin.”<sup>64</sup> In light of this thought, the Black Church encouraged and supported political movements that aided in the freeing of the enslaved. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia was one of many Black churches that assisted the Underground Railroad and the Abolitionist movement. There were other ways in which the church was heavily involved in political activity. Nathaniel Paul, a Black minister who, in 1822, became the first pastor of the African Baptist Church in Albany, New York, used his position in the church to speak out against slavery. Through lectures and publications in the *Freedom’s Journal* and *Rights for All*, Paul voiced his concerns about the conditions of African Americans and the abolition of slavery.<sup>65</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, a noted author on the subject of the Black Church, considered the independent Black Church movement as “the first Black freedom movement” in America.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, clergymen and preachers of the early Black Church utilized their voices for political outcomes. For example, Richard Allen, a former slave and a Methodist preacher, in April of 1787 established a mutual aid

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>64</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*. (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972), 8.

<sup>65</sup> Anthony P. Pinn, Edt. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*. (Ft. Myers: University Press of Florida, 2002), 45.

<sup>66</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 102 - 114.

society called the Free African Society. Allen was credited with establishing other organizations which were vital to the Black community during his time. In 1830, Allen organized the first of several Negro conventions to discuss issues pertinent to the Black Church and slavery.<sup>67</sup> Andrew Bryan is another example of how the Black Church produced leaders to combat the evil forces of slavery. Andrew Bryan was one of the pioneer Black preachers in the South. Born in 1737 in Goose Creek, South Carolina, Bryan became the minister of the first African Baptist Church in that city. Andrew Bryan used his leadership role in the Black Church to speak out against slavery. These and other Black men and women of the gospel used their voices, talents, and leadership to organize political strategies for the benefit of the church.

In the church, preachers were the leaders and the foundation for political life in the Black community. This is largely due to the fact that preachers were instantly and automatically received into the Black community as leaders sanctioned by the divine. Given this divine status in the Black community, Black preachers were thought to be a unique phenomenon. W.E.B. Du Bois shares this view. He notes that preachers are “the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a boss, an intriguer, an idealist—all these things he is....”<sup>68</sup> History is replete with examples of how Black preachers used their position within the Black Church to influence political activity. The career of Bishop Henry M. Turner serves as an example. Born in

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<sup>67</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (London: Duke University Press, 1990), 51-52

South Carolina in 1834, Turner acquired some education through private instruction. He joined the Methodist Church at fourteen and later became a Minister and served as a chaplain in the United States Army. Following the Civil War, Turner transferred to the African Methodist Episcopal Church where he advanced to an itinerant preacher and later to the position of an elder. In the mid-1800's, Henry M. Tuner became involved in politics; he organized Negroes in the Republican Party and was elected to the Georgia Legislature.<sup>69</sup> Another outspoken preacher who achieved political prominence was Bishop James W. Hood of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. During the Reconstruction period, James W. Hood was elected president to what is considered to be the first political convention assembled by freemen. Hood served as a magistrate and later as a Deputy Collector of Internal Revenue for the United States. Subsequently, Hood was appointed Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of North Carolina.<sup>70</sup> In addition to preachers becoming evolved in politics, the Black Church was a place where Blacks could aspire to become leaders and symbols of status. Moreover, the Black Church served as a political arena in that it allowed parishioners the privilege to vote in church elections. African Americans were denied voting privileges in local, state, and federal elections and consequently, the Black Church became their political arena. It was through the Black Church Black men and women satisfied their leadership ambitions, their thirst for power, and experienced the fulfillment of

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<sup>68</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1903), 190-191.

<sup>69</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 32.

<sup>70</sup> Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 42.

political life. Mays and Nicholson have noted: “The local churches, associations, conventions and conferences became the African American’s Democratic and Republican conventions, his Legislature and his Senate and House of Representatives.”<sup>71</sup> The Black Church was the political heartbeat of the Black community. Through the Black Church, congregants experienced the political life that the dominant culture denied them.

The political and the redemptive qualities were early themes in Black Religion. These two principles represent the spiritual and protest principles, which are part of five core principles that make up the basis for Black Religion. Moreover, emphasis on these two principles signaled a point of departure from European Christianity. Indeed, African slaves reinterpreted Christianity to deal with the cruelties they experienced as a result of slavery. As Black Religion became an established institution, the protest and spirituality principles became basic themes in Black Religion and remain so still to this day.

From 1800 to 1910, Black Religion flourished. During this time, the principles of protest and spirituality manifested themselves in the Black community through various means. As with the other core principles of Black Religion (Equality, Freedom, and Unity), it was not until 1955, the start of the modern day Civil Rights Movement, that the other three core principles in Black Religion were truly legitimated as core principles. In the next chapter, I will examine how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the key figures in the Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm X and his legacy, and others brought into focus the equality,

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<sup>71</sup> Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro Church*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969), 9.

freedom, and unity principles in Black Religion and legitimated these themes as core principles in Black Religion.

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Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy, now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlight path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children. –Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have A Dream Speech." (1963).

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Impact of the Civil Rights Era**

#### **Kingian Ideology**

The Civil Rights Movement engendered many lofty principles; among them were freedom, unity, and equality. These three principles were among the central themes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated as he traveled throughout the South. His cry for all men to be free resonated throughout his epistles, sermons, and speeches as he called for unity and equality for all Americans. In his relentless dedication to bring about a world of peace and harmony among all races, Dr. King utilized principles such as freedom, unity, and equality; and these principles were well understood within Black Religion. A closer look at how the Civil Rights Movement began illuminates the fact that these principles have deep ties to the Black Church; and Dr. King, as a key orchestrator of the Civil Rights Movement, employed these principles as a means to accomplish his ends.

In December of 1955, the Montgomery City Bus Boycott was launched when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white patron on the city transit. Supporting Parks in her brave act of civil protest was Martin Luther King, Jr., the impetus behind the Civil Rights Movement. King, who was completing his Ph.D. from Boston University in Philosophy, employed the nonviolence philosophy promoted by Mahatma Gandhi as a strategy for social reform.

Although Gandhi provided Dr. King with the method for social reform, Jesus and Christian ethics supplied Dr. King with the basis for developing his tenets on nonviolent resistance. Dr. King writes that it was in the Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that he discovered the method for social reform that he had been seeking: "I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom"<sup>72</sup> Like Gandhi, Dr. King believed it was most effective to implement the philosophy of nonviolence holistically. Yet, in Dr. King's view, there is no distinction between sacred and secular, religious and ethical, and the individual and social. Accordingly, Dr. King comprised a philosophy on nonviolence that combined his deep faith in Christianity with intense social involvement.

From his student days in the early 1950s at Crozer Seminary, Dr. King was well versed in Christian ethics. The concept of Christian love that was emphasized so potently in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, pervaded, to a large degree, many of the thoughts and writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. For example, Dr. King believed that the Christian ethic of love could resolve the race problem. He called the love that Christ exemplified "the most durable power in the world" and believed it to be "the most potent instrument available in mankind's quest for peace and security."<sup>73</sup> Employing the Christian love ethic, Dr. King developed a strategy of nonviolence resistance philosophy that

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<sup>72</sup> Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search For the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), 48.

<sup>73</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength of Love.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 56.

illuminated the principles of freedom, unity, and equality as a means to vociferate and eradicate the blatant racial discrimination that pervaded Black America.

The Civil Rights Movement evoked a spirit of unity among its followers. Many American citizens, both Black and White, united in the cause for Civil Rights. This fact became evident as Blacks and Whites across the South united for lunch counter sit-ins, marchers, demonstrations, and boycotts. In addition to Blacks and Whites uniting, whole communities came together; across racial lines adults and children united to support the cause of the Civil Rights Movement. Unity was an ongoing theme throughout the Civil Rights Movement. However, the concept of unity is accented in Dr. King's notion of the "Beloved Community." Dr. King's conception of a Beloved Community consisted of a "transformed" and "regenerated" human society. In 1957, Dr. King explicated his thoughts of the Beloved Community in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's newsletter. Dr. King described the purpose and goals of the Beloved Community as follows: "The ultimate aim of SCLC is to foster and create the 'beloved community' in America where brotherhood is a reality....SCLC works for integration. Our ultimate goal is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living—integration."<sup>74</sup> Dr. King envisioned the Beloved Community as an integrated society wherein brotherhood and unity would pervade all aspects of American society.

Dr. King believed deeply in the concept of the "Beloved Community." In some of his early writings, King articulated his thoughts advocating the Beloved

Community. In an article referencing the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King wrote that the boycott “is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community.”<sup>75</sup> The concept of the Beloved Community remained the cornerstone of Dr. King’s philosophy throughout the movement and can be cited in his last book. “Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation...”<sup>76</sup> Dr. King’s notion of the Beloved Community was an extraordinary way for him to advocate unity of a race, community, and nation.

Freedom has always been a basic principle in Black Religion. As the Civil Rights Movement progressed, it became the foundation of the struggle. That is to say that the movement transcended the racial concerns of Blacks. Indeed, as Dr. King dealt with the social issue of the day, he made it clear that the struggle was not merely a racial issue, but an issue of morality verses immorality. In light of this view, in addition to freeing Blacks from the cruelties of racial discrimination, Dr. King also saw the movement as freeing White America from the guilt of racial oppression. Dr. King’s thoughts on oppression coincide with Noel Leo Erskine’s view of oppression which expresses that: “Every human being by virtue of being a human being has inherent worth, and no person, society, or culture has the right to deny his/her personhood. One of the sins against humanity is the attempt of people in power to strip the oppressed of their freedom and dignity.”<sup>77</sup> Erskine believes that it is a sin against humanity to deny one his [or her] freedom. Akin to Erskine, Dr. King felt very strongly regarding

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<sup>74</sup> Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search For the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), 120

<sup>75</sup> Smith and Zepp, *Search For the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 119.

denying one his [her] freedom. As Dr. King so emphatically communicated to the American public, the dominance of one culture over another and the power of oppression yields segregation, racism, and poverty. Dr. King advocated freedom and equality for all Americans; he fought to free Black America from the social ills of racism and poverty. And as the movement matured, freedom became an imbuing factor.

During the Civil Rights Movement, equality became a paramount theme. As with freedom and unity, equality has always been a major theme in Black Religion; however, during the Civil Rights Movement, equality became one of the intransigent themes of the movement. Lunch counter sit-ins in the South are examples of how equality became such a paramount theme of the Civil Rights movement. On March 9, 1960, students from Atlanta University, Clark, Morehouse, Morris Brown, and Spellman colleges united for the protest of equality for African Americans. In so doing, they delineated their grievances in the March 9 edition of the *Atlanta Constitution*. In listing their grievances, they spoke of a separate and unequal educational system, the inequality of voting among Blacks and Whites, and the fact that Black hospitals were unequal to White hospitals.<sup>76</sup> These, among others concerns, were brought to light as the students in the South struggled to gain equality. All throughout the South student and adult organizations were protesting for equality. In such cases, SNCC— (Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee) staged sit-ins throughout the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Noel Leo Erskine, *King Among The Theologians*. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 147.

South advocating equality at lunch counters and public facilities. The Freedom Riders, in other cases, protested for equality in interstate travel. The equality issue between Whites and Blacks galvanized the nation and forced President Kennedy to confront the issue in a nationally televised speech:

This nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal; and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened. It ought to be possible, therefore, for American students of any color to attend any public institution they select without having to be backed up by troops. It ought to be possible for American consumers of any color to receive equal service in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants, and theaters and retail stores, without being forced to resort to demonstrations in the street. And it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register and to vote in a free election without interference or fear of reprisal. It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color.<sup>79</sup>

The principle of equality consumed the nation and Dr. King, who, along with other supporters and participants of the Civil Rights Movement, were instrumental in bringing this issue before the nation.

Dr. King was an extraordinary individual with enormous faith. Through his leadership, the Black Church was thrust to the forefront of Civil Rights Movement. Having a historical background in the Black Church, Dr. King utilized

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<sup>78</sup> Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerals Gill, eds. *The Eyes On The Prize. Eyes.* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 118-119.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-161.

the Black Church as a grassroots movement. By intricately involving the Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King and others help raise freedom, unity, and equality to a level of legitimacy within Black Religion.

### **Where Do We Go From Here? 1970's**

Civil Rights legislation of 1964 and 1965 charted a new direction for the Civil Rights Movement. As the Civil Rights Movement matured, it became evident to its leaders that the movement was on an inevitable course for change. The seeds for this change were planted, in general by the Nation of Islam, and in particular, by Malcolm X. Malcolm X, an ex-convict and converted Muslim after serving a prison sentence of nearly seven years, rose to national prominence as the national spokesman for the Nation of Islam. Under the auspices of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X advocated the Nation of Islam's ideology of Black Nationalism. As a national spokesman for the Nation, Malcolm advocated that the Black man was a victim of America instead of a citizen. Malcolm did not see the "American Dream"; rather, he saw the "American Nightmare." Through his message to Black America, he communicated his thoughts accordingly:

We have a common oppressor, a common exploiter, and a common discriminator. But once we all realize that we have a common enemy, then we unite—on the basis of what we have in common. And what we have foremost in common is that enemy—the white man...We need to stop airing our differences in front of the white man, put the white man out

of our meetings, and then sit down and talk shop with each other. That's what we've got to do.<sup>80</sup>

Malcolm X was a staunch proponent of the separation of races. His philosophy was rooted in the understanding that Blacks should control the political and economic elements within their communities. With his superior oratorical skills and his prehensile acuteness on self-pride and self-determination, Malcolm X ushered in a new racial pride that consumed many young Black Americans. Among those young Black Americans were the leaders of SNCC, Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In the fall of 1964, Malcolm met with SNCC representatives John Lewis and Don Harris; this meeting is just one of the many meetings Malcolm had with young Black Civil Rights leaders. Under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael, SNCC led a campaign that advocated the relinquishing of white participation in the Civil Rights struggle. Malcolm X had brought to the forefront of Black America the concepts of pride in Blackness, the necessity to know Black history, Black separation, the need for Black unity, and Black political and economic control of institutions in the Black communities.<sup>81</sup> By the mid 1960s, there was a new racial consciousness—a positive emphasis on self-identity, African American history, and the destiny of African Americans. This new black consciousness, Black Power, as Stokely Carmichael dubbed it, legitimated Blackness. Moreover, this new Black Power consciousness became materialized in Black art, music, and literature; it also fostered an unpredicted

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>81</sup> George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon, Jr. and Charles J. Wellborn, *Religion In America*.(New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 351.



intellectual and cultural development in Black America. Armed with the newly acquired right to participate in the electoral process, in addition to a new pride in self-image, Blacks were embarking upon a frontier never before treaded. This new black consciousness set the stage for African Americans to flourish in the mainstream of American life.

### **Changes in Ideological Forms**

As “Black Pride” swept through Black America, it brought about a sense of Black independence among many African Americans. This new enthusiasm regarding Black pride was encapsulated in C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya’s thought on Black Power. Lincoln and Mamiya write: “Black Power, therefore, means black freedom, black self determination, wherein Black people no longer view themselves as animals devoid of human dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny.”<sup>82</sup> As Black America became consumed with Black pride, there was a shift from the “ideal” of the Beloved Community set forth by Dr. King to economic empowerment which consisted of making strides in education, economics, and equality. Throughout the 70’s Black Americans made momentous strides in educational attainment and economic achievement. For example, in Atlanta under Mayor Maynard Jackson, the percent of Black municipal employees rose from 40 percent in 1973 to 55.6 percent in 1978.<sup>83</sup> Other statistics show that Black professionals in Atlanta had doubled since 1970, which is representative of an increase of more

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<sup>82</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (London: Duke University Press, 1990), 4.

than 40 percent.<sup>84</sup> The legal profession witnessed a dramatic increase of Blacks in the field of law. According to an Association of American Law Schools' survey of minority students, in 1969-70 there were 2,128 Black American students enrolled in law studies compared to the 5,503 of Black students in 1976-77.<sup>85</sup> This represents a significant increase in African American representation in the legal profession. There were other professions such as medicine and politics that saw significant increases in African American participation. Such gains made by African Americans are indicative of the fact that many African Americans, although emboldened by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s thoughts of the Beloved Community, sought realistic and reachable goals in the areas of education, economics, and equality.

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<sup>83</sup> Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerals Gill, eds. *The Eyes On The Prize. Eyes*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 594.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 626.

“Religion is not exclusively either an obligatory philosophy or a practical discipline: it is both one and the other at the same time. Thought and action are closely linked to the point of being inseparable. Religion corresponds to stage of social development where these two functions are not yet dissociated and established apart from each other, but are still so interrelated that it is impossible to draw a clear line of demarcation between them”—Emile Durkheim

## **Chapter Five**

### **A House Divided**

#### **Social and Economic Factors within Black America**

African Americans’ gaining of economic opportunities is typically associated with the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Following World War II, the United States job market and government agencies were two of the primary factors that helped pave the way for better employment opportunities for African Americans. Such employment opportunities served as catalysts for the social and economic advancement of African Americans in America. Consonant with this thought, other areas that became available to African Americans were the armed forces, industrial labor, and universities. Opportunities in these areas were made further available to African Americans by the passing of anti-discrimination laws and Affirmative Action legislations. One chief factor that had a profound effect on Black Americans’ mobility in education was the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling of 1954. This historical decision struck down white supremacy which was codified in law by the Supreme Court’s “separate but equal” ruling in the *Plessey vs. Ferguson* case in 1896. This historic ruling greatly influenced minority representation in universities across the nation. As a result of African Americans gaining access to employment

opportunities afforded to them through national and state agencies, African Americans initiated the process of social and economic advancement America.

### **Social and Economic Division within Black America**

As African Americans made social and economic advancements in American society, a slow but steady bifurcation in Black America started to emerge. Circa 1950, Black America started to resemble two distinctive classes, defined by socioeconomic factors. This characteristic of Black America can be best encapsulated by updating Frazier's term "A Nation in a Nation" to "Two Nations within a Nation." There are several factors that contributed to this socioeconomic divide. Education was one of the primary factors. According to William R. Scott and William G. Shade, since 1940 "the median years of school completed by Blacks have doubled and is close to that of Whites." Scott and Shade further reported that "more than 80 percent of Blacks had four or more years of high school, and one in nine African Americans had four or more years of college." Both these statistics represent a six fold increase from 1940 to 1975.<sup>86</sup> Other statistics support the contention that there appears to be a socioeconomic divide in Black America. Between 1960 and 1965, 380,000 African Americans acquired white-collar employment. This data is indicative of the fact that the Black middle class rose to about four million—one fifth of the total African American population. Moreover, by 1980, Harvard political scientist Martin L. Kilson reported that Blacks working in white-collar jobs had increased by 40 percent.<sup>87</sup> These figures indicate a steady incline in the Black middle-class. In contrast, the

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<sup>86</sup> William R. Schott and William G. Shade, eds. *Upon These Shores*.(London: Routledge, 2000), 307.

Black underclass has grown in size. The phrase Black underclass refers to a segment of Black America who's isolated from mainstream America and locked into poverty over an extended period of time, with the status of poverty occurring from generation to generation. From 1937 to 1978, the welfare portion of the national budget has grown from approximately \$146.9 million to \$25 billion, and continues to grow.<sup>88</sup> Other factors that contribute to the growing underclass are single family households. In 1992, 46 percent of all Black households were headed by females. This corresponds with the 47 percent decrease in dual-parent households since 1940.<sup>89</sup> The aforementioned statistics on the Black underclass are consonant with Scott and Shade's research, which reveals that as of 1984, in metropolitan areas such as Chicago, females, head 90 percent of families with children and 83 percent of the project families receive welfare.<sup>90</sup> This problem was first reported on a national scale in the mid 60's. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan diagnosed the problem in its infancy. In his report, Moynihan commented on this glaring problem in Black America. He reported that, "There is considerable evidence that the Negro community is in fact dividing between a stable middle-class group that is steadily growing stronger and more successful, and an increasingly disorganized and disadvantaged lower-class group."<sup>91</sup> As the Black underclass grew, there were subsequent reports published such as the one written in 1987 by University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*. In his publication on the

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<sup>87</sup> Schott and Shade, eds. *Upon These Shores*, 322.

<sup>88</sup> Douglas G. Glasgow, *The Black Underclass*. (London: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1980), 12.

<sup>89</sup> William R. Schott and William G. Shade, eds. *Upon These Shores*.(London: Routledge, 2000), 307

underclass, Wilson wrote about the many factors that resulted in the joblessness, hopelessness, drugs abuse, and societal ills that transformed neighborhoods across America into a “phantasmagoria of disintegrating family life.”<sup>92</sup> The deteriorating social and economic conditions of the Black underclass, most scholars speculated, was one of the primary motivating factors for middle-class Black America to distinguish themselves from underclass Black America. In *Upon These Shores*, Scott and Shade discussed this phenomenon. Scott and Shade recorded Black middle-class residential patterns over the past twenty years, citing that today’s Black middle-class have distanced themselves geographically from the Black underclass. These residential patterns were also noted in an article in the *New York Times*. In a June 14, 1992, article in *The New York Times Magazine*, David J. Dent reported on this phenomenon. According to Dent:

What some consider the essence of the American dream—suburbia—became a reality for a record number of blacks in the 1980’s. In 1990, 32 percent of all black Americans in metropolitan areas lived in suburban neighborhoods, a record 6 percent increase from 1980.... These blacks are moving to black upper-and middle –class neighborhoods, usually pockets in counties that have a white majority.<sup>93</sup>

Dent’s thought regarding the Black middle-class’ flight from urban settings to suburbia squarely aligns with C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya’s

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.,312.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 343.

thoughts regarding the migration of Blacks to suburbia. Citing this phenomenon, Lincoln and Mamiya note that since the 1960's, 48 percent of the Black population in Atlanta has moved out of the central city to the surrounding counties.<sup>94</sup> The consequence of such separation in Black America has resulted in middle-class Black Americans becoming more physically and behaviorally distanced from the ghetto. Consequently, members of the Black middle-class feel "embattled" and are less reluctant to make commitments to the Black underclass and be associated with them. In his book, *The Black Underclass*, Douglas G. Glasgow noted similar sentiments. Glasgow's view is that middle-class Black professionals are so busy meeting the demands of their professional roles and of mainstream life that they simply do not have time to contribute to treating the ills of the Black underclass. He writes, "Even though the more recent growth of the Black middle income group has in large measure been the consequence of the social upheavals of the 1960's, their involvement in mainstream activities nearly eliminates their ability and, in some cases, desire to attend to the crisis of the underclass."<sup>95</sup> The gap between the Black middle-class and the Black underclass is presenting new challenges in dealing with race, poverty, and upward mobility for the Black underclass. This "new schism" as Andrew Billingsley has dubbed it, has become a pervasive and acute problem in Black America.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>94</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (London: Duke University Press, 1990), 384.

<sup>95</sup> Douglas G. Glasgow, *The Black Underclass*. (London: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1980), 14.

## **The Rise of the Black Middle-class Religious Ideology and the Perpetual State of the Black Underclass**

In recent history, many scholars and social scientists have shared dialogue on the topic of the Black Church and the state of Black America. The May 23, 1988 issue of the *New York Times* called attention to this problem. The article stated that: "Increasingly, the black church has stepped in to try to repair the breaches in Black family life by social, economic, and political change. Their efforts range from complex, foundation-supported child development programs to simple but sensible adopt-a-family projects."<sup>96</sup> Similarly, there was an article in the November 1993 issue of *Ebony Magazine* highlighting 15 of the "Greatest Black Preachers" in America. *Ebony Magazine* lists such preachers as Gardner Taylor, the late Samuel D. Proctor, Jeremiah Wright, and Charles Adams, among others. The article stated: "all these preachers were highly educated, community-minded activists, and each of their churches operates extensive community outreach programs."<sup>97</sup> Investigating the issue of community outreach among Black churches, Dr. Andrew Billingsley posed the question, "How widespread is this community outreach?" In a survey Billingsley conducted, he found that of 315 churches, 69 percent actively engaged in one or more outreach programs. Billingsley's survey produced similar results in the Midwest. In surveying the Midwest region, he noted that of the 320 churches, 66 percent conducted similar programs. Billingsley also reported that, in a national survey, Lincoln and Mamiya found that 71 percent of urban churches conducted such

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<sup>96</sup> Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87.



programs.<sup>98</sup> Although Billingsley's research indicates that there is a considerable amount of outreach programs in churches across the nation, his analysis of the effectiveness of these programs proves problematic, in that there is no documentation indicating the efficacy of such programs. A more precise indication of the effectiveness of these programs is needed to successfully approximate their usefulness. Billingsley puts forth a convincing argument regarding the quantity of church programs in the Black community. However, the Black Church's role in the Black community should not be based on the quantity of programs, but rather the quality of such programs. For it is the quality of such programs, and not the quantity, that determines their effectiveness. Indeed, the aforementioned programs are not as socially and politically potent as the ones that were established by the Black Church during the Civil Rights Era.

Billingsley's research concludes this fact:

We also conclude that the nature of that outreach activity is different from the community activity of the civil rights era. During the 1950's and 1960's, black churches outreach was more likely to be social action and protest against the oppression from forces external to the black community. Contemporary black church community outreach, on the other hand, is more likely to be social service or community development, addressing problems within the black community.<sup>99</sup>

Furthermore, in his conclusion, Billingsley notes that:

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 88-89

<sup>99</sup> Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 89

Thus the external strategies or reform of the earlier era have been supplemented by internal strategies of reform today. The rationale for this change is that the nature of the crisis facing the African American community has shifted dramatically. The earlier problems have not been solved, despite extraordinary progress. But new problems have overtaken the old ones in saliency and immediacy.”<sup>100</sup>

Although Billingsley is correct in the latter part of his conclusion that the old problems have not been remedied and the new problems in Black urban America have created an exigency that has prompted new strategies, what Billingsley and other scholars fail to note is that while the urban Black crisis is increasing in size and depth, the Black Church is turning its attention to another segment of Black America: the Black Middle-Class. As this distinct and definite socioeconomic divide between the Black middle-class and the Black underclass becomes more defined, the Black Church has assumed a dyadic role which, unfortunately, caters to the needs of the Black middle-class more so than to those of the Black underclass. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya note this fact:

As we mentioned, some studies point out the increasing bifurcation of the black community into two main class divisions: a coping sector of middle-income working-class and middle-class black communities, and a crisis sector of poor black communities, involving the working poor and the dependent poor...The gradual emergence of two fairly distinct black

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

Americas along class lines—of two nations within a nation—has raised a serious challenge to the Black Church.<sup>101</sup>

In addressing the socioeconomic divide in Black America and the Black Church's ability to address the needs of two separate Black Americas, Brian Sanders proffers the following:

The needs of the middle-class Blacks are simply not the same as those of the lower-class. The problem of an inner city Black community living in government housing are simply not the problems of suburban black homeowners... Since the needs of the Black underclass are seemingly so different from those of the growing middle-class, the church has had to make a choice about who they would serve, balance those needs, or find a way to synthesize them.<sup>102</sup>

As Lincoln and Sanders have pointed out, the Black Church is at a crossroads. While traditionally the Black Church has been the cornerstone of the Black community, addressing the internal and external societal ills that threatened the culture fabric of Black life, currently, it is assuming a role in Black life unparalleled to its past. This new role identifies with the needs of the Black middle-class. As the Black Church caters to the values of middle-class Black America, the emphasis on family functions, social activities, community services, opportunities for self-expression and validation of the mental and physical well being of the less fortunate is diminished.

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<sup>101</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (London: Duke University Press, 1990), 384.

For decades, leading scholars and social scientists such as Billingsley and Lincoln, to name a few, have documented the distinctive role religion has played in the lives of African Americans. In a journal article titled “Religious Socialization and Education Attainment Among African Americans: An Empirical Assessment,” Diane R. Brown of Howard University and Lawrence E. Gray of Virginia Commonwealth University note several functions that I believe are critically salient to the socialization experience of African Americans:

- 1) Psychological affirmation (provides a source of personal comfort and consultation, emotional support, etc.);
- 2) Identity (links the individual to the past and the future; provides group values, a place in the universe, and a sense of recognition or “somebodiness”);
- 3) Social support (provides advice, material aids and services, exchange of services and assistance);
- 4) Protest (provides political education, advocacy, and political ideology);
- 5) Economic activity (provides employment opportunities, expenditures for church operations, and fund raising);
- 6) Education (provides Sunday school, adult education seminars, and forums for development of leadership and organizational skills);
- 7) Creativity (promotes the development of spirituals, plays, rich and poetic sermons, and gospel music) and ;

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<sup>102</sup> Brian D. Sanders. *Power And Sacrifice: The Transformation Of Black Theology As Reflected In Black*

- 8) Social intercourse (sponsors picnics, church dinners, sports informal gatherings, sharing, rehearsals, and church trips)<sup>103</sup>

These eight critical functions of religious socialization serve as processes through which an individual learns and internalizes attitudes, values, and behaviors within the context of African American life. Without the presence of the Black Church, which historically provided these functions for the Black community, there is no other institution standing ready to function in this capacity in the Black underclass community. The slow-but-steady diverging of Black Religion to middle-class Black ideology means the absence of the Black Church in the underclass Black community. Pursuant to that thought, it stands to reason that the absence of the Black Church in the Black underclass community means a perpetuation of the many societal ills that plague the Black underclass. As Brown and Gray have noted in their research regarding the Black Church, religion plays a profound role in the shaping and defining of individuals and their communities and that “... literature shows that religion, and particularly the Black church, exerts an important influence in the socialization of African Americans both from an individual as well as societal perspective.”<sup>104</sup>

As the Black middle-class becomes established, a “New Mandate” takes precedence, as Brian Sanders has suggested. This new mandate refers to the

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*Preaching Since The Civil Rights Era*. Masters Thesis, University of South Florida, 2002. p. 46.

<sup>103</sup> Diane R. Brown and Lawrence E. Gray, “Religious Socialization and Educational Attainment Among African Americans: An Empirical Assessment,” *Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 3(1991): 412.

<sup>104</sup> Brown and Gray, “Religious Socialization and Educational Attainment Among African Americans: An Empirical Assessment,” 415.

Black middle-class concept of “Getting Out” as opposed to “Getting Over.”<sup>105</sup>

This virtual new phenomenon in Black Theology is commonly referred to as “Prosperity Theology.” Prosperity Theology is a relatively new form of theology that is becoming increasingly popular among middle-class African American churches. Prosperity preaching can be traced back to Kenneth Hagin. Simply put, prosperity preaching expresses the fact that God is the giver of all things and He can “Bless” you with an abundance of wealth if you exercise the proper faith. Since its inception, Prosperity Theology has spread throughout churches across racial lines, influencing such spiritual leaders as Oral Roberts, Kenneth Copland, Fredrick Price and Creflo Dollar. Although “prosperity preaching” is not mainstream in all Black Churches across the nation, increasingly it is becoming the norm in mainstream middle-class Black churches. According to *Essence Magazine*, in 1970, the nation had ten megachurches with congregations of 2,000 or more members. By 1990, there were 250 megachurches. According to John Vaughan, the founder of a consultant organization that consults and monitors megachurches, the total number of megachurches has surpassed the 1,000 mark.<sup>106</sup> More specifically, there are approximately 300 Black megachurches across the country. They appeal, for the most part, to middle-class churchgoers. Their attendance is growing at a rapid rate. For example, Creflo Dollar’s World Changing Ministries, an Atlanta based church, started out in 1986 with eight followers; as of December of 1995, it has exceeded

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<sup>105</sup> Brian D. Sanders. *Power And Sacrifice: The Transformation Of Black Theology As Reflected In Black Preaching Since The Civil Rights Era*. Masters Thesis, University of South Florida, 2002. 54.

a membership of 23,000.<sup>107</sup> Other Black megachurches with large memberships include T.D. Jakes' Potter's House, with a membership of 30,000 and Betty Peebles' Jericho City of Praise, with a membership of 19,000.<sup>108</sup> As data reflects, there has been a large movement in middle-class Black America towards megachurches and to hear a gospel that focuses on self-help, positive thinking, and prosperity. This construct, which is commonly known as "prosperity preaching," is quickly becoming the choice of many middle-class Black Americans.

Brian Sanders makes a cogent argument about how Black Theology has changed from a communal appeal to more of an individualistic appeal as a result of prosperity theology becoming a main focus of the middle-class religious ideology. I follow and agree with Sanders on this matter. However, I would like to expand upon his thesis. Thus, a point of departure is at hand. The core values in Black Religion—freedom, unity, protest, spirituality, and equality—have played a pivotal role in slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and in other significant periods in African American history. Since the establishment of the Black Church, these values have helped shape and define Black life. As the Black Church increasingly caters to the needs of the Black middle-class, "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness" in the Black underclass, which Cornel West described as "Nihilism," will continue to worsen. A growing number of Black middle-class

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<sup>106</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, "A Dollar & A Dream," *Essence*, 01 December 2005, 170.

<sup>107</sup> Wilkerson, "A Dollar & A Dream," 171.

<sup>108</sup> Wilkerson, "A Dollar & A Dream," 171.

churches and an overwhelming number of Black megachurches subscribe to the concept of prosperity theology. As prosperity theology becomes the theme of the day, the Black Church's traditional theme of social justice wanes. Case in point, Revealing Truth Ministries, a local church which advocates "prosperity theology," lists their outreach ministries on their church pamphlet; these consist of such ministries as the membership care department, partnership department, and television production. Of the 34 ministries, none appeared to be for the uplift of the community or society at large. As Black Churches become consumed with the notion of prosperity, community uplift becomes obsolete and the churches take on the semblance of a genuine business. Such is the case with World Changers Ministries, which is headed by Creflo Dollar. Dr. Dollar is one of the leading proponents of prosperity theology; he is also the chief executive officer of the World Changers Ministries, an \$80 million dollar enterprise with 400 employees. Within World Changers Ministries there are flow charts, cabinet meetings, audits, and auditors—all which resemble a fortune 500 company.<sup>109</sup> In stark contrast, Black Churches, who serve low to working class members, have a different view of prosperity and community outreach. In an interview I conducted, the President of the Progressive M and E Baptist State Convention of Florida, Reverend Bartholomew Banks, discredited prosperity theology as advocated by Fredrick Price and Creflo Dollar among others. Reverend Banks explains that community outreach and political/civic efforts are top priorities at St.

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<sup>109</sup> Wilkerson, "A Dollar & A Dream," 166.



John Missionary Baptist Church where he pastors.<sup>110</sup> At the Harvest Time Worship Center in Tampa, Apostle David Boyd shared similar sentiments. In an interview, Apostle Boyd cited community outreach as a primary focus of his church.<sup>111</sup> Black Churches in low and underclass communities appear to focus on community uplift. The abandonment of community building by middle-class religious institutions further isolates, both socially and culturally, the Black underclass. As this problem pervades Black America, the cultural and social values of the Black underclass are greatly diminished, breeding hopelessness. In regard to the Black underclass, I share the thoughts of Cornel West: “In fact, the major enemy of black survival in America has been neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive.”<sup>112</sup> In *Race Matters*, Cornell West advocates the need for institutions such as the Black Church to address and redress problems of the Black underclass. Espousing his thoughts regarding the Black Church and the Black underclass, West notes that in the past, Blacks utilized the church as guard to protect and strengthen the Black community against oppressive forces. West explains:

The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic treat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness,

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<sup>110</sup> Personal Interview. February 22, 2006.

<sup>111</sup> Personal Interview. March 26, 2006.

<sup>112</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 15.

meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggles that embodies values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline, and excellence....These traditions consist primarily of black religious and civic institutions that sustained familial and communal networks of support. <sup>113</sup>

In dealing with the underclass crisis, many scholars agree that the Black Church, which has been the source of strength for the Black community, is the primary institution to adequately deal with such a perverse and pervasive problem.

Robert Franklin, in *Another Day's Journey*, talks about the Black Church confronting the African American crisis. His thoughts mirror those of Lincoln, Billingsley, and West. Franklin's view is that the church is, by far, the primary institution to deal with the issues facing Black America. He writes, "I firmly believe that the key to restoring urban civil society depends on the vitality of the faith community, including but not limiting to the black church."<sup>114</sup> Franklin strongly advocates faith-based initiatives to help restore the Black community. Akin to the thoughts of Franklin, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya also believe heavily in the fact that the church is the key to solving the urban crisis. In *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Lincoln and Mamiya discuss how the Black Church was one of the few institutions that reached and unified urban America; in their view, as the Black Church becomes divided in its role in the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Robert M. Franklin, *Another Day's Journey*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 54.

Black community, the challenge is set before the Black Church and Black clergy to make an attempt to reach the Black underclass. In writing about the reform that must take place in urban America, Andrew Billingsley echoes these thoughts. He agrees with Lincoln and Mamiya that: “the black church must be at the center of that reform.”<sup>115</sup> Billingsley feels strongly about the Black Church and the urban crisis and the future of Black America. In discussing the issue of the Black Church and the state of Black America, Billingsley posed the following question: “The question for the future is this: Can the black church garner enough strength from its rich, fruitful past and its struggles in the present against widespread social turmoil to lead the African American community into a viable future?”<sup>116</sup> Billingsley feels that unless the Black Church comes to the rescue of the Black community, the Black community faces internal and external forces “that threaten the viability and well-being of the black community.” Many civic leaders and scholars alike have put forth their expressions of how the church is the force that sustains the Black community. One such man is Leon Sullivan. A true soldier for the cause and betterment of Black life, he proffered the following:

I believe in God. I believe God is working now in the nation and in the world in an extraordinary way. I believe that God can do anything. I believe God wants me to help men (women and children) to live better on earth. I believe not only in milk and honey in heaven but in eggs and ham on earth besides. I believe in the future. For though we grope through the maze of dark passages, I see the light. And I know the light will conquer

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<sup>115</sup> Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 186.

the darkness. I believe in the Black man (woman and child). I believe that he has the brain power, the heart power, the soul power, to equal in every enterprise or activity any other man on the face of the globe, and to match him accomplishment for accomplishment and ability for ability. All the Black man needs is the opportunity to prove fully and freely, and without obstacles and restraint, what he can do. Indeed, I believe in America. I am, in many ways, a patriot. I am proud of my Americanism. America, with all her faults, is still our country and the country of our children. As far as I am concerned, it is up to us to straighten out what is wrong with it. <sup>117</sup>

Leon Sullivan expressed his belief in God to help remedy the ills of this great nation. There are others, who, just as Sullivan, feel that through the power of religious means, many of the ills that plague our nation in general, and our Black communities in particular, can be restored.

The Black Church has always been the source of strength for the Black community. The divergence of the Black Church's role in the Black community on behalf of middle-class Black America has overlooked a critical segment of Black America—the underclass. Should the Black Church increasingly continue to identify with the middle-class Black populace, the needs of the Black underclass will continue to be ignored, and thus be perpetuated. In 1993, in honor of her father's birthday, Bernice King challenged Black people and the Black Church to a new era of dedication and activism. Her view is that the activism of the Black Church will determine the viability of the African American

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

community and its well-being in the future. King was candid in her challenge to the nation and the Black Church. I would like to close with a quote from Miss King: “My brothers and sisters, it is not enough to say that we marched with Dr. King 25 years ago. We need to ask ourselves, ‘What are we doing now?’”<sup>118</sup>

## **Conclusion**

### **Changing Dynamics in Black Religion**

Black Religion has withstood the test of time; it has aided Africans and African Americans alike in their quest to understand their reality here in America. In so doing, Black Religion legitimated a core set of principles to include: Freedom, Unity, Equality, Protest, and Spirituality. These five principles have shaped and defined, to a large degree, the Black experience here in America. Prior to the 1970's, such principles were the bedrock of the Black Church. The social and economic dynamics of the Black community has changed; consequently, the dynamics of Black Religion has changed in its efforts to address the changing needs of the Black community. As the Black community continues to divide along social and economic lines, these five core principles that were legitimated by slavery and the Civil Rights Movement are being superseded. Moreover, as Black Americans transcended from the lower to the middle-class, there has been a secularization process which has taken place in regard to these five principles. For middle-class Black America, the significance

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 194.

of these five core principles in Black Religion have diminished and are being supplanted with a new principle, which is being legitimated by middle-class Black America. This new construct in Black Religion is referred to as “Prosperity Theology.” Prosperity Theology is growing among middle-class Black Americans, and as it continues to grow, the core principles—freedom, unity, equality, protest, and spirituality—will continue to diminish. While I believe it is safe to argue the point that the middle-class values of a culture have a better chance at survival than those of the lower-class, it stands to reason that the core principles in Black Religion, which helped Black America in general and the Black underclass in particular, are being seriously threatened. As Black America continues to diversify, Black Religion must find a way to transcend class barriers or take her place in antiquity as an institution that once unified a culture.

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