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An Historical Kaleidoscope

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MILTON C. SERNETT

THE PAUCITY OF CRITICAL STUDIES on the religious history of the American Negro has, until recently, been more than a special case of benign neglect. It has been a part of the larger crime of blindness to all things black within the American panorama. But the revolution in consciousness of the 1960s has made us all aware that the history of Americans of African descent can no longer be an alien segment in the public record of things deemed worth remembering. Ralph Ellison's "invisible man" has surfaced and must be reckoned with.

Carter G. Woodson, the founder of the original Negro history movement, wrote in 1939: "A definitive history of the Negro church . . . would leave practically no phase of the history of the Negro in American untouched."¹ Historians of American Christianity have only begun to realize the full import of Woodson's statement; they are not yet prepared to reap the full harvest, but are busy sorting out the tares from the wheat.² What has come into focus, however, is a kaleidoscope of images, some factual, some fanciful, of Negro religion. As these images pass in review, the observer discovers that while interpretations of the nature and meaning of Black religion, and Negro Christianity in particular, have not been lacking, they have been put to ulterior purposes. Regardless of ethnic identification, or religious persuasion, writers on the religious life of the American Negro have not been able to extricate analysis of the subject from the intricate and entrapping web of black-white relations.

The religion of the Negro was a hard-fought for pawn in the ideological debate between the antebellum North and South. Proponents of the "peculiar institution" piously pronounced that Southern Christians were doing more for the souls of the slaves than all the "freedom shriekers" of the North. In search of higher ground, abolitionist clergymen struck out at the inherent contradiction between baptism and bondage and professed deep skepticism of the vaunted missionary claims of the Southern clergy.³ Overlooking the

NOTE: *This essay was originally presented to a joint meeting of the Departments of Historical Theology of Concordia Seminary, Springfield, and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, held on April 28, 1973 at Litchfield, Illinois.*

1. Carter G. Woodson, "The Negro Church, an All-Comprehending Institution," *The Negro History Bulletin*, III, 1 (October, 1939), 7.
2. A useful survey of past contributions and present needs is Robert T. Handy's article, "Negro Christianity and American Church Historiography." In *Reinterpretations in American Church History*, ed. by Jerald C. Brauer (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 91-112.
3. William G. Brownlow and Abram Pryne, *Ought American Slavery to Be Perpetuated? A Debate Between Rev. W. G. Brownlow and Rev. A. Pryne. Held at Philadelphia, 1858.* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1858), pp. 40, 99. Brownlow, a Southerner, claimed that as of the late 1850s, "hundreds of thousands of Southern slaves listen to the glad tidings of the Gospel."

existence of the segregated pew in Northern churches, these critics made much of the hypocrisy of the slavemaster who prayed with his slave on Sunday and beat him on Monday. Like Orange Scott, the Methodist abolitionist, they argued that plantation missions were designed to make the Negro "a good slave, not a bold soldier of Jesus Christ . . ."⁴

Almost as soon as the Union armies liberated portions of the Confederacy, newly freed Blacks deserted the churches of their former masters. This gave the lie to the claim by the Southern denominations that by 1860 they were *effectively* caring for the spiritual welfare of almost a half million slaves.⁵ Yet few observers saw the exodus as the positive assertion of the Freedmen that they wished to worship under their own vine and fig tree. Writers sympathetic to the "lost cause" accused the Freedmen of having been seduced by "fanatical carpetbaggers" and of conducting "religious orgies" under the leadership of preachers who could be categorized as "good, bad, and indifferent."⁶

In the social upheaval occasioned by Reconstruction legislation, many white Southerners, threatened by the presence of *de jure* free Negroes, spun the myth of the pious old-time Negro who represented the earlier religious age of submission and humility. How wise of God, the mythmakers said, that an entire race was rescued from the mudsill of a religion "animistic, oppressed, and infinitely crude" and

4. Quoted in Daniel G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 85. Skepticism was also expressed regarding the possibility that a slave could live the fully moral Christian life while being the chattel property of another. See, for example, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Does Slavery Christianize the Negro? Anti-Slavery Tracts, No. 4* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1855). Like many antebellum Blacks, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass was discerning enough to distinguish between slaveholding piety, which he described as "a cold and flinty-hearted thing, having neither principles of right action nor bowels of compassion," and Christianity, rightly understood, which to his mind was "pure, peaccable, gentle easy to be entreated, full of good fruits, and without hypocrisy." Douglass, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. by Philip S. Foner (4 vols.: New York: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1950), I, 197; II, 273.
5. Representatives of the independent Negro churches in the North quickly reaped a bountiful harvest among the newly freed slaves. Something of the magnitude of the black exodus from the white Southern denominations is indicated by figures from the Methodists. In 1861 the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, claimed in excess of 200,000 Negro members. By 1866 there were only 78,742 left, and of this number only 8,000 remained with the white Methodists when the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1870. Many Southern Blacks flocked to the standard of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and its great educator and bishop, the Rev. Daniel Alexander Payne. Elmer T. Clark, *The Negro and His Religion* (Nashville, Tenn.: The Cokesbury Press, 1924), pp. 35-36. Joseph Crane Hartzell, *Methodism and the Negro in the United States* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1894), p. 9. Daniel Alexander Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1891), pp. 467-68.
6. Clark, *The Negro and His Religion*, p. 35. Joseph B. Earnest, *The Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia* (Charlottesville, Va.: The Michie Co., 1914), p. 8.

introduced to Christianity and civilization.⁷ Neglectful of the Denmark Vesey's, the James W. C. Pennington's, and the countless now forgotten slaves who found a mandate for liberation in the Gospel, the mythmakers focused upon the pious old-time "uncles" and the servile venerable "coloured preachers" who had found special favor with their former masters.⁸

Old myths were resurrected and given pseudo-scientific status during the Jim Crow era that followed the collapse of the Reconstruction programs and persisted into the 20th century.⁹ Apologists for white supremacy found the Negro wanting in almost every capacity except that of a propensity for religion. The notion was widespread that the Negro "race" was by nature incurably religious, more so than perhaps any other on the face of the earth. This view, of course, was not novel, for Thomas Jefferson had speculated in his *Notes on Virginia* that the Negro was more emotional and sensual than the white man, characteristics which the camp-meeting revivalists also commented upon and sought to capitalize on.¹⁰

7. Richard Clark Reed, "A Sketch of the Religious History of the Negroes in the South," in *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, Second Series, Vol. IV (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914), p. 178. Charles M. Melden, "Religion and the Negro," in *Progress of a Race*, under the general authorship of William H. Croghan and J. L. Nichols (Naperville, Ill.: J. L. Nichols & Co., 1920), pp. 310, 313. Slavery would be justified, Edward Pollard claimed, "if nothing else was accomplished in taking the African from the gloom and tangles of his forests and from savage suffering and savage despair" than his conversion to Christ. Edward A. Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South* (New York: Putney & Russell, 1859), pp. 83-84.
8. Even to this day the epithet "Uncle Tom" is pinned upon a Negro preacher who is suspected of accommodation to the racial status-quo, either through silence and fear or outright compromise. This is an unfortunate miscasting of the original Uncle Tom of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, who held to his Christian principles even at the cost of his life. A provocative assessment of the Uncle Tom stereotype is available in J. C. Furnas, *Goodby to Uncle Tom* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1956).
9. Southern churchmen not only refused to abandon the notion that slavery had been ordained by God, but they continued to provide grist for the racists' mill in the post-Reconstruction era. See H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . . Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1972), pp. 258-305. The triumph of racial orthodoxy during the early part of the twentieth century and the contributions made by religious spokesmen are examined in I. A. Newby, *Jim Crow's Defense: Anti-Negro Thought in America 1900-1930* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), pp. 83-109.
10. Sentiments attributing a unique "religiosity" to Negroes are expressed by William T. Alexander, *History of the Colored Race in America* (2nd rev. ed.; New Orleans: Palmetto Publishing Co., 1887), p. 527; and Melden, "Religion and the Negro," p. 314. Initially, as Winthrop Jordan has shown us, whites doubted that the African was capable of religious conversion, but this belief eventually gave way to the notion that the Negro did indeed have a soul and was capable of religious instruction. See Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books Inc., 1968), pp. 179-190. On Jefferson's musings about differences between whites and blacks, see Jordan, *White Over Black*, pp. 435-461. We are told that preachers who had the task of "getting up" a revival actually liked to have Negroes present, for it was a common belief that they were more easily excited than whites. Walter B. Posey, *The Development of Methodism in the Old Southwest, 1793-1824* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: Weatherford Printing Company, 1933), p. 98.

It seems mildly ironic that of all the attributes of humanness, the only area in which the Negro was given pre-eminence was that of an innate inclination for religion. I suspect that was done without upsetting traditional notions of the inferiority of the Negro. Pre-eminence in religious sensibility was given to the Negro because such an attribute was not felt to threaten the racial status quo. Religious enthusiasm, even when thought to be ludicrous, was not particularly upsetting and might even siphon off discontent that would ordinarily spill over into the social or political realm.

Some Negro historians, with no desire to underscore the tenets of racism, have nevertheless accepted the hypothesis that Negro religion has had no particular interest in earthly matters. Traditional Negro religion is thought to have focused upon the hereafter where in Heaven the oppressed "would be rich and free to sing, shout, walk, and fly about carrying the news." This dysfunctional, indeed, escapist theme emphasized the compensatory role—the harder the cross, the brighter the crown—that Christianity played in the life of the American Negro, especially during the days of bondage.¹¹ Even those revisionist scholars, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, who tried to highlight the African survivals in the religious life of the American Negro, did not credit religion with having done much more than enabled an oppressed people to endure.¹² Psychic survival, of course, is not to be gainsayed, even if that *was* all that Christianity provided the Negro. But one wonders what else can be said.

Much more has been said as a result of the events since Martin Luther King, Jr., made the Bible "a flaming source of inspiration" in the Civil Rights struggle.¹³ Dr. King, with his prophetic summons for love in action and for concretized justice, stripped away the myth of the docile, otherworldly Negro preacher. During the turbulent Sixties, some Blacks moved beyond the strategy of passive civil disobedience and attempted to radicalize the Negro churches in behalf of "Black Power" and "Black Nationalism." Searching for a usable past, these radicalizers found that Clio, the muse of History, does indeed have "Soul." Emphasizing the historic protest strain in Negro religion, revisionist writers cast out the compensatory thesis in favor of the revolutionary one. The secret religious meetings of the slaves, the "invisible institution" on the plantations, became planning sessions for rebellion. The story of the rise of the independent Negro

11. G[old] R[efined] Wilson, "The Religion of the American Negro Slave: His Attitude Toward Life and Death," *The Journal of Negro History*, VIII, 1 (January, 1923), 41, 43, 65, 71.
Benjamin E. Mayes, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*, with a preface by Vincent Harding (New York: Atheneum, 1968), pp. 22-23, 25-26. Originally published in 1938 by Chapman & Grimes, Inc., Boston.

12. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961), pp. 149-50. First published in hardcover in 1903 by A. C. McClurg & Co., Chicago.

13. Gary T. Marx, "Religion: Opiate or Inspiration of Civil Rights Militancy Among Negroes?" *American Sociological Review*, XXXII, 1 (February, 1967), 64-65, 71.

churches in the North was rewritten so as to fit the contemporary demands of the Black Christian Nationalist.¹⁴

Too much of the mood of the 1960s has been read back into the history of Negro Christianity. Myth-making has never known racial boundaries. I seriously question the historical justification of the attempts to clothe Richard Allen, the founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and his associates in the garb of the Black Nationalist.¹⁵ Lawrence Jones is correct in asserting that the actions of the early Negro churchmen were not simply a response to white racism. Allen and associates *were* making a positive affirmation of self-pride, yet they by no means intended to found an exclusionist or separatist fellowship based solely on race.¹⁶

Revisionists also claimed that the intense emotion and ecstasy, as reflected, for example, in the "shout," are peculiar to Negro religion and, therefore, another basis for Black pride. Spontaneous spirited joy and fervor in Negro churches was set in contrast to "the quietness, the apparent serenity, the orderliness of worship" that allegedly undergirded "spiritual hollowness" in white churches.¹⁷ The assumption that a free-style form of worship, sometimes bordering on religious hysteria, is a unique quality, or indeed, a representative one, of the Negro church is unwarranted, and, ironically, a strange twist of attitude. For at many times in the past, Negro church leaders,

14. Revisionist interpretations of Black religion which emphasize its historic protest role are becoming increasingly plentiful. See, for example, Lerone Bennett, Jr., "The Black Pioneer Period," Part IV of "The Making of Black America," *Ebony*, XXV, 12 (October 1970), 45-55; Lawrence N. Jones, "They Sought a City: The Black Church and Churchmen in the Nineteenth Century," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XXVI, 3 (Spring, 1971), 253-72; James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 91-115.
15. This is the characterization given in Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, pp. 94, 137. Also see his article, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church," *Christianity and Crisis*, XXX, 18 (November 2 & 16, 1970), 244-50.
16. Jones, "Black Churches in Historical Perspective," 228. Horace Talbert, *The Sons of Allen* (Xenia, Ohio: The Aldine Press, 1906), p. 24.
17. William B. McClain, "The Genius of the Black Church," *Christianity and Crisis*, XXX, 18 (November 2 & 16, 1970), 251. Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *The Politics of God* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 189, 193-94. In an earlier volume, *Black Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, pp. 41, 45), Washington had argued that the excessive emotionalism of Negro churches was a matter of class rather than cultural heritage and ought gradually be eliminated. In *Black Religion* (1964), Washington typified Negro congregations as amusement centers for the disinherited. In *The Politics of God* (1967), he declared that "potentially creative black congregations for blacks represent the single greatest potential for degrouping and reconciliation." Finally, in *Black Sects and Cults* (1972), Washington cast Negro religious groups in the role of power-centered communities in which "the social, economic, and political concerns take precedence over spiritual *qua* spiritual concerns and become real religious concerns." Washington's personal journey from despair to exultation over the potential for power in the Negro churches is surely a sign of how present concerns shape historical writing. See his *Black Religion*, pp. 42-52; *The Politics of God* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 188; *Black Sects and Cults: The Power Axis in An Ethnic Ethic* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), pp. 146-47.

such as Daniel Alexander Payne and Francis J. Grimke, have fought against that style of worship which made more noise about the pearly gates than about applying Christianity in a common sense way to everyday duties and needs. Both Payne and Grimke contributed to the introduction of an educated ministry into the Negro denominations.¹⁸ It is certainly apparent today that diversity in styles of worship are as widespread in Negro churches, sects, and cults, as they are in white ones.

Perhaps the foremost example of the effect of recent history on Negro religion can be found in the Black Christian Nationalist movement. The combination of black nationalism with an abhorrence of a white God and/or a white Jesus has surfaced in the past in the teachings of, for example, Marcus Garvey, leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and is, of course, a dominant theme in the "theology" of the Black Muslims.¹⁹ In the 1960s, the Rev. Albert B. Cleage, Jr., of the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit revived the notions of a black Jesus and found a ready audience among the young Negro militants. But in seeking to bridge black nationalism and the Christian tradition by refashioning Jesus into a revolutionary black leader, a Zealot seeking to lead a Black-Jewish nation to freedom, Cleage has distorted history to make history.²⁰ As Joseph R. Washington, Jr., has written, "the black *cult* seeking the black ethos does not need to be informed by a lie."²¹

In matters of faith and order, the antebellum Negro churches, particularly those of the Methodist and Baptist persuasions, remained within the perimeters of Evangelical theology and piety.²² Recently, however, there have been attempts to work out a distinctive Black Theology to supplement Black Power. To get beyond white theology, it is argued, "the theology of survival must now flow into the theology of liberation." Not all the evidence is yet in, for the craftsmen are still at their workbenches, but it seems that in this "theology of

18. Grimke was pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C. Francis J. Grimke, *The Afro-American Pulpit in Relation to Race Elevation* (Washington, D.C.: n. p., 1893), pp. 10-11. Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville, Tenn.: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1888), pp. 92-94. Also see his *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, pp. 155, 189-70, 195-96, 395.

19. Washington, *Black Sects and Cults*, p. 128. C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3-32.

20. In the introduction to a collection of his sermons, Cleage writes: "Black people cannot build dignity on their knees worshipping a white Christ. For nearly 500 years the illusion that Jesus was white dominated the world only because white Europeans dominated the world. Now, with the emergence of the nationalist movements of the world's colored majority, the historic truth is finally beginning to emerge—that Jesus was the non-white leader of a non-white people struggling for national liberation against the rule of a white nation, Rome." *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 3.

21. Washington, *Black Sects and Cults*, p. 131.

22. This is a theme which I have extensively explored in my "Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Independent Negro Church, 1787-1865" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Delaware, 1972), Chapters V & VI.

liberation" there will be an emphasis on how spiritual power ought to combat racism and increase secular power. There is to be less emphasis upon the hereafter and more upon what "God has done, is doing, and will do for His people." Power for black people, which is more than the espousal of correct Christian dogmatics, is to be the measuring stick by which this theology is to be judged.²³ "To preserve the spiritual in realistic secular power communities," writes Joseph R. Washington, Jr., in his new and important *Black Sects and Cults: The Power Axis in an Ethnic Ethic*, "is a task whereby black theologians would be faithful to the tradition of black religion in the past and add a much needed dimension to all religious life in this society."²⁴

Any articulation of a theology designed especially for the Black Church which roots itself in the premise that the Gospel can be restricted to the *single* goal of increasing secular power is sure to fall victim to the one factor which has conditioned our attitudes toward Negro religion throughout the past—namely, the reality of change. For once the powerless gain power, then a theology of power is exhausted. But insofar as spokesmen for a "Black Theology" highlight those aspects of the Christian tradition which focus upon justice and brotherhood for all peoples, they will have benefitted us all. The Negro church has come of age; we need to give ear to her voice. But we must be on guard against any interpretation of Negro religion which underwrites racial stereotypes, gives aid and comfort to separatism based on race, distorts the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or diverts our attention from working for concretized justice in the Church and in the world.

23. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, pp. 117, 125-26. Reuben A. Sheares II, "Beyond White Theology," *Christianity and Crisis*, XXX, 18 (November 2 & 16, 1970), 232. See also Vincent Harding, "The Religion of Black Power," in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, edited by Donald R. Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 3-38.

24. Washington, *Black Sects and Cults*, p. 146.