

African American Religion

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I am Dennis C. Dickerson, Professor of History and a member of the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and also the historiographer of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the nation's oldest Black religious institutions. It is my happy task to review with you an overview of the African-American religious experience.

From the time that Africans were transported across the Atlantic to be enslaved in the Americas, in North and South America and in the Caribbean, they brought with them their religious practices and religious beliefs. Some of these persons who were enslaved had already been exposed to Islam and to Christianity and others practiced their own native African religions. Those, for example, who had been exposed to Catholicism, mainly through the Portuguese, continued their Catholic practices in places like South Carolina, where some historians argue that their Catholic background helped to influence the way in which the Stono rebellion of 1739 was planned and prosecuted.

Historians and Anthropologists and Linguists and other persons in the Humanities and in the Social Sciences have written innumerable studies which chronicle the persistence of African religious survivals into the African-American experience. There are beliefs, there are practices, such as aesthetic worship and call and response in worship, which many scholars date back to the African background. Africans who were in what became the United States, appropriated Christianity and molded it to fit their own beliefs and their own needs while they were enslaved. Their exposure to Christianity was facilitated by the missionary efforts of a number of groups, such as the Associates of Dr. Bray, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Both were Anglican organizations that had early exposure, who worked early on in catechesis with African-American slaves, mainly in the South in the early 18th Century.

Later on in the 18th Century, African-Americans became exposed to the missionary efforts and the missionary initiatives of Baptists and Methodists. These two religious bodies were particularly influential among African-Americans, primarily because they

preached a gospel that was egalitarian in its thrust. Each of them preached a gospel that emphasized the equality of all people before God. Also, they licensed Africans to preach. So there were, in the 18th Century, many African-Americans who would become Baptist and Methodist preachers. Also the Baptists and the Methodists, along with the Quakers and other groups, were fiercely anti-slavery. The anti-slavery stance of Baptists and Methodists proved very attractive to African-Americans, who inclined toward Christianity. In 1777 for example, an African-American slave, Richard Allen, was converted by itinerant Methodist preachers in Delaware. In 1783, Richard Allen and his brother, after working for several years to save up \$2,000 in Continental money, purchased their freedom. Richard Allen became a traveling itinerant Methodist preacher.

He was not alone. There were others like Harry Hoosier, another Methodist who traveled with Francis Asbury, who was very influential as an early black Methodist preacher. There were others who were Baptist and Presbyterian and those who belonged to other religious bodies. This was a very important development in the 18th Century, because the existence of these Black preachers helped to spearhead and lay the foundations for the rise of independent Black churches.

The earliest of these Black churches had its roots in the *Free African Society*, founded in 1787. Richard Allen, whom I mentioned earlier, was one of the founders of the *Free African Society*, which started off as a mutual aid group and which developed into two Black congregations which were dedicated in 1794 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. One was St. Thomas Episcopal Church and the other was Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Both of these religious institutions are still in existence today. Bethel Church, for example, still stands on the same ground that Richard Allen had set apart in 1794.

There were other Black churches between 1787 and 1820 which were established. They were Presbyterian, they were Episcopal, they were Congregational, they were Baptist. They formed in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and New York and Boston and Baltimore and Providence and a number of other northern and Middle Atlantic sites. These independent Black churches were especially important because they were the first evidences in African-American history of not only Black religious autonomy, but of Black institutional autonomy. Not only did they serve the religious needs of the African-

American population, but they also served as meeting places for free Blacks in the cities just named.

They also functioned as schools and sometimes they sponsored schools. It was also within their walls that fraternal organizations and other community groups--temperance groups and others--had their founding. These Black churches were particularly important in the 1810s and 1820s, as free Blacks debated the wisdom of colonization. The American Colonization Society, established in 1817, held out the hope to some free Blacks that they could be repatriated to Africa to the newly-established country in the 1820s of Liberia. Some African-American preachers like Lott Carey, responded to the colonizationist initiative. Others, like Richard Allen and Absalem Jones and others as the colonizationist movement rose to influence, opposed colonization efforts to repatriate Blacks to Africa, fearing that it would deprive the slave Black population of leadership.

Religion among the slaves was particularly important, especially in the South, as slavery took a stronger root with the expansion of the plantation system south of the Mason-Dixon line. Masters sometimes allowed preachers--Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and, in a few cases, Roman Catholic--to conduct evangelization efforts in catechesis efforts among slaves. As with their northern counterparts, religion played a very important role among slaves in instilling in them a sense of self-esteem that once they were saved from sin and once they were regarded as children of God, they gave them a status in the heavenly scheme of things that was deprived them in their temporal existence.

Religious meetings also had a utilitarian purpose. For example, in 1822, Denmark Vesey, a free Black in Charleston, South Carolina, used his AME meeting place to plot a massive slave insurrection, later aborted, that threatened to overthrow slavery in Charleston, South Carolina and in the surrounding areas. Northern Black churches were also stops on the Underground Railroad. In a number of places, Buffalo, Albany, Philadelphia, Boston, and others, these Black churches were places to which freed slaves went in order to gain safety and solace and succor for their trip northward, either to other parts of the United States or into Canada.

Black churches during the antebellum period played a very important role in the freedom struggle. When the Civil War occurred, Black churches were oftentimes places where the Union army recruited African-Americans to become soldiers in the Union army. In fact, during the Civil War itself, there were over a dozen African-Americans who became chaplains in the Union army.

Henry M. Turner, who became a chaplain in 1863, was joined by a number of other Black clergy, including Samuel Harrison, who was a Congregational minister in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, who became chaplain to the now-famous 54th Massachusetts Regiment. He and other Black clergy served during the Civil War as some of the earliest African-American officers in the United States military. The Reconstruction period between 1865 and 1877 was another very important point in African-American religious development.

Northern Black denominations--Methodist and Baptist--as well as northern White denominations--Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Episcopal--came south after the Civil War to evangelize among the four million African-Americans who had been manumitted from slavery. As a result of their efforts, Black churches were started throughout the South and Black churches were spreading rapidly. They reflected all of these denominational entities. The other important development attending Black church development in the South after the Civil War was the establishment of a whole range of Black colleges sponsored by these various denominations. Fisk University in this City, Nashville, Tennessee, was started by the American Missionary Association, a group that was affiliated with the Congregational Church.

Also in this state, Lane College was established by the newly-founded Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, The CME church, which was a byproduct of the Methodist Episcopal Church South. There were other colleges. In North Carolina, the Presbyterians established Johnson C. Smith University and there were others affiliated with other denominations. These institutions became very important in the training of Black clergy and Black teachers, Black doctors, and other professionals that would serve a largely Black constituency, mainly in the South.

Also during the Reconstruction period, a number of African-American clergy entered politics, as Blacks were enfranchised. There were many clergy who held office in many parts of the South. Perhaps the state with the largest aggregation of Black officeholders, including a large number of Black clergy, was South Carolina. In fact, one of the clergy, Richard H. Cain, actually became a congressman from South Carolina. In Mississippi, another clergy, Hiram R. Revels, served in the United States Senate as a representative from his state.

After the Civil War ended, Black church development shifted onto another plateau, what one might call a millennial mission. This had two very important components. One, Black churches in the United States became increasingly interested in spreading their denominations to Africans who were in the Caribbean and also to the mother continent in Africa. The AME church, for example, in 1891, established Liberia and Sierra Leone as annual conferences. The Baptists and the AME Zion church did similarly.

Another important component of this millennial vision was the development of an Afro-centric theology. In the 1890s for example, there were Black clergy who started to interpret the Bible and interpret other sacred texts from an Afro-centric perspective. Benjamin T. Tanner, for example, wrote in 1895 "The Color of Solomon What?," which argued that Solomon, one of the important figures in the Hebrew Bible, was not a White man, but someone who was either of African or of yellowish-brown complexion. In 1898, Bishop Henry M. Turner, the first Civil War chaplain whom I mentioned earlier, delivered an address called "God is a Negro."

A few years earlier, Benjamin W.R. Nettleton, who was invited to speak at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, gave a very important and influential paper on the Negro and early Christianity, in which he talked about Luke, the author of the gospel in the New Testament, as being African and Simon the Cyrenian, who helped Jesus carry the cross at Golgotha, was also African. These expressions of Afro-centric theology and as growing interests in Africa and in the Caribbean, was an effort on the part of African-American persons of faith to connect their Black religious institutions in the United States with other parts of the African Diaspora, not only in the western hemisphere, but also on the mother continent.

Women started to play a very important role in African-American religious life. The most important African-American woman, Jarena Lee, received from Richard Allen in the 1810s a license to become an exhorter, the first Black woman ever formally authorized to preach.

Through the 19th Century and into the 20th Century, Black women started to play not only a very important role as clergy, although unordained, many of them played the role as evangelists, Amanda Berry Smith perhaps being the most famous, a woman of African Methodist and holiness background. Women also began to play a very important role in the founding of a number of institutions within African-American churches. The missionary societies of the Baptist and Methodist churches became very important. The wives of bishops of the Black Methodist denominations also played a very important leadership role in their missionary organizations.

Black women played a very important role in the institutional life of Black churches. For example, the wives of Black Methodist bishops became leaders of missionary organizations. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in a very influential book, "Righteous Discontent," chronicles the efforts of Nanny Helen Burrows in 1900, and founded the auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention. It's not until the 1950s and 1960s that women win recognition as ordained clergy, mainly in the Black Methodist churches, but also in other churches after that period.

As a result of the great migration from the South to the North, there was an explosion in a number of new Black church and denominations. Mainly responsible for this phenomena was the Reverend Charles Harrison Mason, who had been a Black Baptist preacher and later a holiness preacher who founded the Church of God in Christ after he had gone to the Azusa Street revivals of 1906 and heard the preaching of William C. Moore and developed the practice of *glossolalia*, speaking in tongues. These explosion of Black churches, not only in the North, but in the South, proved very important for the later development of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement with respect to its religious influences grew out of two very important phenomena. One, it was the importance and the willingness or the initiative of Black church members and Black church pastors in such cities as Montgomery and

Baton Rouge and Tallahassee and Atlanta to lead their parishioners in the 1950s in bus boycotts. Also, the work of Black religious intellectuals such as Benjamin E. Mays, Howard Thurman, George Kelsey, and others who had gone to India in the 1930s and 1940s to meet with Mahatma Gandhi and to transfer his philosophy of nonviolent direct action to the Africa-American struggle in the United States also fertilized the Civil Rights Movement. Over the 1950s and 1960s, many of the leaders not only of national efforts and national initiatives, but also of local and regional initiatives, grew out of the Black church. Such clergy as Martin Luther King, Jr. who, for a time, pastored the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama and later became co-paster of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, became a very important leader and rallying point for African-American clergy and African-American churches.

In 1957 he, along with other clergy, established the *Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. There were others who joined Dr. King in the Civil Rights crusade. Fred Shuttlesworth, a clergyman in Birmingham, Alabama, C.K. Steele, a clergyman in Tallahassee, Florida, Kelly Miller Smith, a clergyman in Nashville, Tennessee, and many, many others. As the Civil Rights Movement gained important landmark legislation in the 1960s, the '64 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Some younger militants became attracted to Black power and out of that grew such theologians as James Cone and others who responded to the Black power movement by developing a Black theology which emphasized not only the importance of Black liberation, but the importance of power sharing for African-Americans in American society. Ironically, this movement for Black theology and Black power gave birth to a kind of spiritual schizophrenia, which affected Black churches in the last 25 years of the 20th Century where you have the juxtaposition between a Black theology of liberation and increased Black preaching on prosperity, as exemplified by such persons as Fred Price in Los Angeles and T.J. Jakes of Dallas, Texas, and Eddie Long of Atlanta, Georgia. These two tendencies in Black religion stand as the two parts of the dichotomy that affects the African-American religious experience in the early part of the 21st Century.