

## Historical Overview of African American Religion

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### Abstract

One of the central themes in the American history is the interaction between white and black cultures, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of America. The religion perfectly reflects this interaction. As Campbell notes, African American religion has been extremely important both for American religious culture as a whole, and for the black community itself. When freedmen withdrew from white-dominated churches and formed their religious institutions, black churches, they quickly occupied a central position in African Americans' lives. They became the chief social and cultural institutions which blacks made and operated for themselves, and therefore were necessary in promoting a sense of communal purpose. They provided the organizational structure for most activities of the community: economic, political, and educational as well as religious.

This article overviews the processes out of which the black church formed as an independent institution, that served as a unifying, powerful and stimulating instrument for the African American community's future advancements and struggle for equality.

**Keywords:** Christianity, African Americans, Black Church

### Introduction

One of the central themes in the American history is the interaction between white and black cultures, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of America. "Of no area has this been truer than religion. African American religion has been extremely important both for American religious culture as a whole, and for the black community itself" (N. Cambell, 1997.p.116). Malcolm X used to say that "the black man had been robbed by the white man of his culture, of his identity, of his soul, of his self" (Malcolm X, 1980, p. 263).

Enslaved People of African descent brought their traditions, languages, and a wide range of religious beliefs and practices with them when they came to Americas. As Booker T. Washington interestingly noted in his "Religious Life of the Negroe", the Negroe came to Americas with the pagan idea of his African ancestors; he acquired under slavery a number of Christian ideas, and at the present time he is slowly learning what those ideas mean in practical life" (Washington,1905). In the religion of Native Africans there was no place of future reward or punishment, no heaven and no hell. Consequently, the Negroe had little sense of sin. Washington believed that, "slavery gave the Negroe race one great consolation, namely, the Christian religion" (Washington, 1905).

However, W. E. B. DuBois, interestingly suggests that

by the middle of the eighteenth century the black slave occupied the lowest place in a new economic system, and "nothing suited his condition then better than the doctrines of passive submission embodies in the newly learned Christianity" (DuBois, 1996.p.499). Realizing this fact, slave masters aided religious propaganda within certain bounds. "The long system of repression and degradation of the Negroe tended to emphasize the elements of his character which made him a valuable chattel: courtesy became humility, moral strength degenerated into submission, and the exquisite native appreciation of the beautiful became an infinite capacity for dumb suffering" (ibid., p. 500). Although at this stage it is important to note that there is another vision of the part played by the Christian religion in black culture, which has underlined its significance in supporting the emergence of black identity and self-worth. This may be traced back to the period of slavery before the Civil War. In slave society, masters generally controlled their slaves' religious behavior. Christianity was widely spread on the plantation, both because many masters supported missionary activity but also because 'slaves often converted voluntarily' (Cambell&A.Kean.1997.p.116).

They worshiped under white supervision in services held by white ministers, and in the same churches as their

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masters, however, they had separate seats.

Despite being controlled, slaves themselves formed their own unique religious beliefs and practices, in a manner which made them possible to survive. While enslaved, African Americans formed the feature which influenced black Christianity in the future. The slaves interconnected their African heritage and the evangelical practices they took from white society.

After the American Revolution, when northern states gradually started to abolish slavery, differences emerged in the following years between the experiences of enslaved peoples and those who were relatively free.

When in 1810 the slave trade came to an end and with the increase of the slave population, African people began the transmission of religious practices. In the southern states, in 1770s slaves converted to evangelical religions (Methodist and Baptist faiths). In these denominations the idea that all Christians were equal gave hope to newcomers. Clergy encouraged worship that 'many Africans found to be similar to African worship patterns: singing, clapping, dancing and even spirit-possession' (Maffly-Kipp, 2005).

In the slave lodgings, African Americans mixed African rhythms, singing, and beliefs with evangelical Christianity. Here were developed the spirituals, with their double meanings of religious salvations and freedom from slavery. "And here too, that black preachers, those who believed that God had called them to speak his Word, polished intoned style of extemporaneous preaching" (ibid.). Meanwhile, in the North, freed blacks were also drawn to the evangelical Protestant churches, they also were encouraged by the racial equality. In the 1790s, when migrants from southern states settled in northern cities, some white evangelical leaders tried to control their black members by seating them separately.

By 1816 the African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded. In 1821 the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church came into existence. A third major black Methodist denomination, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in the South after the Civil War. After emancipation, the freedmen withdrew from the white-dominated churches in which they had been forced to worship before the Civil War, and created their own institutions. Black evangelicalism set the dominant tone for African American religious life, and it is obvious, in the efforts made by black Americans during the nineteenth century to grapple with the religious meaning of North American Space.

African American evangelicals agreed with European American evangelicals that the Bible provided not only a description of God's past dealings with the world, but also a set of clues for deciphering the meaning of contemporary history. But they drew differently on a common stock of biblical images. White Protestants often likened America to the

Promised Land. Black Protestants were more inclined to see it as Egypt, the land of their captivity—and to long for an exodus. For a while, emancipation seemed their great deliverance. Just as God had afflicted the Egyptians and brought the children of Israel safely through the Red Sea, so had God afflicted white America with the Civil War and led an African-American chosen people through the waters of war to the safe ground of freedom. But where then was the Promised Land? Throughout the increasingly trying times of the late nineteenth century, black Protestants found themselves hard-pressed to answer that question (A. Raboteu, 1999).

After the Civil War slavery was abolished. However, African Americans faced some questions. Would their civil and political rights be respected? "Would the former slave states of the South be allowed to lock African Americans into second-class status-legally, politically, and economically?" (ibid.).

Emancipation from slavery in 1863 was challenging for African Americans in the South, because along with the organizing religious communities, they had to create new lives, families, to find jobs, "and to figure out what it would mean to live in the United States as citizens rather than property. A long history of antislavery and political activity among Northern black Protestants had convinced them that they could play a major role in the adjustment of the four million freed slaves to American life" (Maffly-Kipp, 2005).

As a consequence, Northern black leaders such as Daniel A. Payne and Theophilus Gould Steward established missions to their Southern counterparts, resulting in the active growth of independent black churches in the Southern states between 1865 and 1900. Mostly white denominations, such as the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Episcopal churches, also sponsored missions, opened schools for freed slaves, and supported the general welfare of Southern blacks, but the majority of African-Americans chose to join the independent black denominations founded in the Northern states during the antebellum era. Finally, in 1894 black Baptists formed the National Baptist Convention, an organization that is presently the largest black religious organization in the United States.

As said before, when freedmen withdrew from white-dominated churches and formed their religious institutions, black churches, they quickly occupied a central position in African-Americans' lives. They became the chief social and cultural institutions which blacks made and operated for themselves, and therefore were necessary in promoting a sense of communal purpose. They provided the organizational structure for most activities of the community: economic, political, and educational as well as religious. At the same time, black churches gave the opportunity of expression of individual faith "in a manner which encouraged

a sense of identity, and confirmed God's role in their lives" (Cambell & Kean, 1997, p. 117). Ministers were not simply the preachers of the gospel, but played the roles of educators, community organizers and political leaders.

Black churches played a central role in the civil rights movement as activity developed across the South at a local level in the 1940s and early 1950s, and then assumed national prominence with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began in 1955. The black church provided potential leaders since "preachers brought to the movement a language which allowed them to link contemporary political struggles to the age-old efforts to escape from captivity and reach the promised land" (ibid).

All the above said is true, if we focus our attention on Martin Luther King, Jr.- a chief articulator of civil rights, who exposes the direct relationship between African American religious struggle for racial and social justice in the United States of America. However, King has been criticized a lot both within black community and from the white churches, who argued that his social activism threatened public order, and that there was a risk of dragging the church into politics. Many individual black ministers did not wish to be socially active. Consequently, Martin Luther King Jr. decided that it would be more valuable to use new organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which he helped to establish in 1957, to encourage the black churches into social action.

King criticized those people in the white religious community who claimed that actions like the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the Birmingham Campaign of 1963 "brought religion too much into politics" (ibid.) Politicians were responsible for changes in political life, not church-men. King in his Letter from Birmingham Jail disagreed and said that such a distinction was not logical when men were facing evil. It was crucial for the blessed to inform the secular if God's will was to be fulfilled. It was impossible for any society to accomplish everything written in the Bible. However, it was always vital that committed Christians try to achieve them. King believed, that "A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law... Any law that uplifts human personality is just, any law that degrades human personality is unjust (King, 1964, p. 84).

The Jim Crow laws of the South were unfair and unjust since segregation made the soul vague and hurt the personality. Using the German theologian Paul Tillich's argument that sin meant division, King indicted segregation because it exemplified man's "awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness" (Ibid.p.85). Through cooperation and contentment, civil disobedience would revive the national conscience, and carry it back to "the sacred heritage of our nation and

the eternal will of God" to all "the best in the American dream".

Even though Christianity has played a crucial role for African Americans, it has been challenged by Islam. The influential factor for the popularity of Islam has been the point that it was the original religion of Africans who were captured and enslaved. "Whereas the black Christian tradition has emphasized the role it played in giving African Americans a sense of identity and purpose, the Muslim claim that theirs was the true faith has fitted well into the search for African roots in other areas of black life" (Cambell & Kean,1997, p.119).

In 1960s, Malcolm X became the most important American spokesman for Islam. Malcolm X was a member of the Nation of Islam, which is scorned by orthodox Muslims, because of its unwillingness to believe that Muhammad himself was the last prophet. The Nation of Islam believes that Elijah Muhammad (Elijah Poole) is the last prophet. However, for Malcolm X Islam offered a way for the recovery of an individuality which had been taken away from him by white Americans. Malcolm believed that, "the black man's mind was destroyed, his identity was destroyed too, 'he has been made to hate his black skin, he has been made to hate the texture of his hair, he has been made to hate the features that God gave him" (Malcolm X, 1980, p.263).

From the recovery of their identity, African Americans had to reject the religion of slavery and segregation, no matter how all-encompassing it was in the black community. In 1960s Islam said no to the approaches of King on racial problems. Martin Luther King was for amalgamation of races, racial problems. However, in the last years of his life, Malcolm X began to admit that some form of collaboration between the subjugated of both the white and the black race was possible. In his Autobiography, Malcolm X consistently shows the links between Christianity and racism. After he broke with the National of Islam, Malcolm X visited Mecca.

Many African Americans like Muslims since there is uniformity between their message and the way they live their lives. Black Christianity, from this point of view, is diluted because of compromising with white society, because of a shared dedication to similar religious beliefs and practices. Members of Nation of Islam believed that the sympathies of the white Americans outside the South towards Martin Luther King Jr. was that he did ' not straightly confront their own involvement in an repressive system. Farrakhan on the contrary, constantly emphasizes two of the most repulsive facts about modern American life. On the one hand, many African -Americans resent the domineering character of white society, and on the other hand, many white Americans fear of their black counterparts.

As Michael Battle, suggests, the spiritual influence of Af-

rican American religious practice spread beyond the nation's shores; global leaders like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu learned from Martin Luther King Jr. how to represent a loving, inclusive African and Christian identity (M.Battle, 2008, p. 7).

In the end, I would like to stress the fact that black church helped African Americans endure the most severe forms of oppression and constructed the appeal "developed for universal communal spirituality. The black church didn't just theorize about democracy, it practiced democracy" (ibid.).

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