The Power of the Black Church:

Retrospect and Prospect

By Earl E. Thorpe

The roots of the black church in America are in Africa, before and during the dawn of civilization. The Old and New Testaments, along with other sources of outstanding reputation, give undeniable testimony about ancient Egyptian civilization's important connections with Christianity and the other world's great religions. Documentation which is equally respectable shows the important roots of the black church in artistically, culturally, and intellectually rich, ancient and more recent communally oriented West and Central African societies. These latter cultures also were characterized by such things as a high degree of dedication to an economic, social, and political democracy; and respect and love for each other by all members of the group; especially for children and the elderly. Religion was an integral and important part of all occasions, days, and places instead of something set apart or isolated.

Long before the modern slave trade, black people knew God in Africa. In America, slave and free, by faith and through love, many blacks have known, worshipped, and served the same God. So highly developed was the religious life of these societies that the people difficulty in creating a synthesis between their religion and the best in the religious life of their slave masters in the Americas. Because these masters had great control over open worship, the synthesis existed, initially as the "invisible institutions" or "Secret Church."

The "Secret Church," along with family life, was the slaves' greatest source of strength and hope, and the main way in which they expressed their true thoughts, feelings, determination and creativity. Here the slaves often used secret codes, in songs and other forms, to arrange prohibited worship services which were held at night in the slave quarters, in hidden places in the woods, or elsewhere away from the eyes and ears of the ruling class. Only while away from whites, from sundown to sunup, did the authentic black community and culture fully reveal and express itself.

In the presence of whites the slaves often had to fake, act, and pretend. Away from whites they ceased to "wear a mask." They consoled and encouraged each other, and told of their hatred for slavery and determination to be free. They made plans to run away or rebel, and they worshipped God with unchecked enthusiasm and joy. Here they prayed, sang and preached, sometimes in lowered voices, and declared that God was on their side and not that of the slaveowners. Here they sang the great Spirituals which they created, and which they also sang during their working hours.

With deepest convictions and feelings, they sang such words as:

"Deep river, my home is over Jordan: I want to cross over into a camp ground."

"Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, along way from home."

"I been 'buked, and I been scorned: Done had a hard time-sho's you born."

"Noboby knows the trouble I see: Nobody knows but Jesus."

"There is joy in that land where I'm bound."

"Rich man dies, he lived so well when he died he found a home in hell."

"Just a little talk with Jesus makes it right."

Walk together children, don't you get weary."

"When the saints go marching in, I want to be in that number."

"Steal away, steal away to Jesus; I ain't got long to stay here."

"Sometimes I hangs my head and cries; But Jesus is going to wipe my weep'n eyes."

"I want Jesus to walk with me."

"Ride on King Jesus, Ride on Conquering King! No man can hinder you."

"Go down Moses, way down in Egypt's land: tell old Pharaoh to let my people go."

"Swing low, sweet chariot: coming for to carry me home."

"We are climbing Jacob's ladder; every round goes higher and higher," and

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down: sometimes I'm almost to the ground."

Where slaveholders ruled, the black church existed as the "invisible institution" or the "Secret Church." Before 1816, chiefly among free blacks in the North and South, the black church also developed as an open, highly important, and powerful institution.

Formal organization in a large way began when racist insults caused ex-slave Richard Allen, Absolom Jones and other blacks in Philadelphia, Pa., to withdraw their membership in 1787 from a racially integrated Methodist Church. Allen and others started the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church which was dedicated in 1794. In 1816 new black Methodist churches in the north broke completely with the white organization and Allen became the first consecrated Bishop. The AME church's growth thereafter was phenomenal. In 1800, some black Methodist churches in New York organized as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and in 1821, they separated completely from the white Methodism.

Black Baptist churches were the most numerous, north and south. They date from 1773 to 1776, with at least one at Silver Bluff, South Carolina and one at Savannah, Ga. After the Civil War, racism and other factors and forces led to the creating of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, later to be named the Christian Methodist Episcopal. As the years passed, other black denominations and churches appeared.

Blacks have been seen that white racism will not allow them to participate, serve, and develop fully in the churches whose memberships are mainly caucasian. Especially in urbanized and industrialized America, some black churches have grown large, highly structured and formalized. Some Afro-Americans have pulled out and started smaller ones. In some of these large churches blacks could not participate, worship, serve, and develop in the manner they desired. Some Afro-Americans have felt that they could not achieve authenticity unless they moved from Christian ity to such faiths as black versions of Judaism or Islam, or made some other religious moves.

In addition to Richard Allen and Absolom Jones, some other outstanding pre-civil War black religious leaders were Nat Turner, John Chavis, Lott Carey, Harry Hoosier, ("Black Harry"), Jesse Peter, Prince Hall, Ralph Freeman, Henry Evans, Daniel Coker, Andrew Bryan, Josiah Bishop, Andrew Marshall, Joseph Willis, Thomas Paul, Christopher Rush, Lemuel Haynes, James W.C. Pennington, Morris Brown, John S. Stewart, George Liele, James Varick, George Collins, Peter Williams, Daniel A. Payne, Alexander Crummel, and Samuel Ringgold Ward. There were many others. Many of these persons provided religious and other leadership opportunities after the Civil War.

As slaves, before 1865, blacks were subject to extreme stress, by whites, from sunup to sundown. Although daily brutalities from white racism were somewhat lessened after 1865, the effects of post-Civil war stress probably have been more damaging to Afro-Americans. Slave had fewer choices and less responsibility for decision making. There was more external compulsion in their lives. Studies by such scholars as W. L. Sawrey, D.C. Conrad, J.V. Brady, J. M. Weiss, and Julian Jaynes make it clear that decision-stress is by far the most damaging. For blacks, slave and free, stress emanating from oppression and exploitation has been a major reason that their churches have been a great blessing to them. In their churches they sang, "turn it over to Jesus" and "take your burden to the Lord and leave it there." In their churches, many blacks have learned that stress is an opportunity, which can lead to greater health or sickness, faith or doubt; to God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, or to the fake gods and "saviors" such as some forms of mental illness, drugs, alcohol, personality cults, and revolutionary suicide.

The black clergymen always has tended to be a many-sided servant, working as a preacher, educator, counselor,

LAWRENCE NEALE JONES

CHARLES JACKSON SARGENT JR.

JAMES DEOTIS ROBERTS

psychologist, lawyer, economist, politician, and in numerous other capacities. Slave and free, he often has been an artist where use of language is concerned. Julian Haynes claims that the qualitative leap of language development, from the bodily signs and primitive sounds of wild animals to that used by civilized people, is the main cause of the origin of consciousness and civilization.

Contrary to this view, it may well be that both syntactical language and consciousness are results rather than causes, and that they followed the discovery of agriculture, which led to the first economic surpluses, which then led to trade and cities. If it is so, the slave preacher, who usually was also a field-hand laborer, owed some of his relevance and abilities to his intimate involvement with agricultural production. After 1865, paid by his own people, the black preacher has had the freest pulpit in America. The black preacher has not needed to seek the support of the local white community. His church church long has been the only major institution which is completely black-owned.

For almost three centuries, the black church has been a center of and meeting place for numerous progressive or militant protest efforts. This includes support for and leadership of such things as the Underground Railroad abolitionist movement and recent civil rights efforts. Because of this, numerous black churches have fallen victim to such things as arson and bombings, and their leaders have been victims of all forms of oppressive behavior including threats, beatings, and homicide.

Still the black church has refused to be silenced. It has attached racism, oppression and exploitation in many way. For example, the highly significant national Negro planning and unity conventions, which met at least a dozen times between 1830-1853, started at Philadelphia's Bethel AME Church. Those conventions usually had the black church as a center, and preachers were very prominent among the leaders.

Until the late nineteenth century, numerous white churches, South and North, were much more likely to have some black members than would be the case after 1900. Where such racially mixed churches existed, various forms of anti-Negroism usually were practiced. Slaves, for example, had no role in management of the church. They had to sit in the rear or upstairs of the church or hold service after the whites, receive communion separately, and listen to reactionary sermons which taught black inferiority. Free blacks in such racially mixed churches also faced various racial insults. As with Richard Allen and others in Philadelphia and elsewhere, blacks took the initiative in separating from white churches. This separation movement had high points after 1800 and again after the end of the Civil War.

During the reconstruction era, the black church was at the forefront in assisting Afro-Americans in the transition from slavery toward freedom. The same is true of its role during the eras of industrialization, monopoly growth, urbanization, and disfranchisement,- with the latter",- accompanying lynchings, race riots, and myriad forms of anti-Negroism. This church also also inspired, taught, and led the race during the so-called Progressive era. World Wars I and II, subsequent wars, through the years of the Great Depression, and since. This church has been a seedbed for the activities of such organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Urban League, Congress of Racial Equality, Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, and Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

During the Reconstruction era the black church experienced great growth. Until the Civil War the AME and AMEZ churches were based mainly in the North. This changed dramatically after 1865. The new and quickly-powerful CME Church grew out of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. In 1870 there were at least one half million black baptists in the southern region alone. By 1970 there were more than eleven million

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Black Church

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black Baptists in the nation. Between 1856-1876, memebership in the AME church increased from 20,000 to 200,000. Growth since the latter date has been outstanding. By 1980 Afro-Americans had membership in several tens of thousands of all black churches.

The black church always has been and remains a major center for the total life of the black community, as well as the spearhead for racial advancement in many areas. It has served as a school in group organizations and management, a welfare organization, a center for learning how to raise and handle money and as a community leader. It has provided the important initial training and development for Afro-American leaders, not only in religion, but in such fields as politics, publishing, business, music, entertainment, education, and in other areas. For example, from this church came such leaders in politics as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Andrew Young.

In Civil Rights struggles, this church has produced other leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy and Jesse Jackson. Numerous black artists, such as Marion Anderson, Leontyne Price, Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, Fats Waller and Nat King Cole, are products of the black church. This church always has shown sensitivity to and appreciation for such things as education, development of business, and black history and culture, and it has been a major force in creating and increasing knowledge of and appreciation for them. The church has launched business enterprises and support libraries, clinics, hospitals and voting drives. This church has been a place where families could gather, develop, and enjoy themselves. Black churches in the United States also have achieved much where missionary work in Africa and elsewhere is concerned.

The black church has started and supported numerous schools at all levels, including higher education. Scholarship aid has been given to thousands of students. By 1900 there were approximately twenty college-type southern black Baptist church institutions of advanced learning. Most of these and some other colleges for blacks usually had more northern white support and control than was the case with the AME Church. Despite the long existence of European influence in such forms as having white trustees, administrators, faculty, and classical curricular offerings, their graduates have made outstanding contributions in many fields.

Since at least the opening of the twentieth century, there has been a rather persistent strugle to make these institutions more relevant where the unique needs and culture of blacks are concerned. Among the schools of higher learning established by black baptists are Virginia Teological Seminary and Selma University, Friendship and Morris Colleges. Some other baptist institutions of higher learning for blacks are Shaw and Virginia Union Universities and Bishop and Benedict Colleges. Among schools started by black Methodist are Wilberforce and Allen Universities, Lane, Morris Brown, and Livingstone Colleges.

The black church has been characterized by a greater informality of worship, greater spontaneity, and full and deep emotional expression. Powerful and deeply moving preaching, praying, and singing have been hallmarks of black worship. Among other things, worship in this has been celebration,- of life, for divine protection and guidance, and for racial victories won and still-to-be-won. This church has been a place of refuge for a race too often tragically wounded by racism, oppression, and exploitation. It has been a spearhead and chief source of the struggle against slavery, and racism, and for full citizenship and human rights opportunities.

The black church and clergy have made numerous important contributions, all of which need to be studied more closely, carefully chronicled and interpreted, to such movements as the struggle against disfranchisement to the Black Progressive Movement of the 1901-1917 period, to the "Negro Renaissance" of the 1920s, the Black Renaissance of the 1960's and 70s, to the anti-Vietnam era struggles, and to other similar movements. During the "Black Revolution" which extended from the late 1950s through much of the 1970s, the role and contributions of the black church were especially outstanding. Because of its great involvement in these struggles, the image which numerous people held of this church as irrelevant and too worldly was considered changed. Significant also during this era was the movement, by now often excellently trained clergy, to develop a black theology and other aspects of a church committed to black awareness and solidarity.

Although the contemporary black church often has a better educated clergy and membership, it is more self-conscious about the need for an orientation to black awareness, and is freequently involved in the struggle for complete liberation from all forms of bondage of man to man. Many people believe that there is still too many instances of glaring deficiencies in all of these other areas. For example: although dialectical and historical materialism constitutes a major form of social and cultural criticism, which is accepted in essence by millions of people on all of the continents, numerous people believe that, along with most Americans, too many members of the Afro-American clergy have not been exposed to it. Among other things, these deficiences cause some Afro-Americans to be indifferent or hostile toward all religion.

That some preachers and religious leaders have been caught using the black church and so-called religious leaders have been caught using and abusing the black church as a "hustle," has not helped so far as negative criticisms are concerned. As is of all churches, in the twentieth century,

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