**The Black Religious Crisis**

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**SUMMARY**

White students seem deeply interested in the study and practice of religion, but religion apparently holds little or no appeal for black students. Black religion is a survival tool that can be (and is) discarded when the individual no longer feels in need of the emotional reinforcement it can provide.

There is something tragically askew in the religious state of black Americans; namely, the near-failure of qualitative development in integrated and/or separate black middle-class churches and denominations.

That same near-failure is of course evident in every mainstream Protestant denomination, black or white, whether the criteria be lack of growth or loss of adult membership, youth participation, trained clergy, theologically alert laity, or commitment to black ecumenism. But nowhere is this reality more poignant than among black United Methodists. Not only did they shrink by 140,000 between 1940 and 1964, but their attrition from an estimated 385,000 since the 1968 decree of "no more segregated jurisdictions" has paralleled the demise of the segregated Central Jurisdiction.

***A Disquieting Inertia***

Since there is no significant countervailing evidence in any integrated and/or middle-class denomination, the lack of qualitative development is the issue of moment -- one that can no longer be avoided without fatal consequences for the healthy growth of black church life.

It is a multifaceted issue laced with serious questions. Is the distinctive religion of black Americans culture-bound? Is it limited to the lower class and therefore alien to the middle class? Is it inherently racial and consequently inimical to integration or to functional interaction between self-accepting and other-regarding ethnics?

That dynamism is not the dominant pattern in middle-class black churches is a virtually undisputed fact, empirically verifiable by any unbiased investigator in most communities where middle-class blacks practice religion. It is precisely because of its pervasiveness that this inertia is so disquieting.

Owing largely to the controversy over more exciting debaters’ points (i.e, What is black religion, black theology, the black church? What is uniquely black in religion or theology or the church?), this alarming situation has been allowed quietly to fester. But, however important and interesting such discussions may prove to be -- and after all, black Christian life can be interpreted in a variety of ways of which none excludes the others -- they amount to little more than whistling in the dark apart from a vibrant community of participants. What is important is that the issue of lack of quality and quantity in middle-class black religious life be rightly understood and addressed. Dealt with in those terms, it is an issue of relevance to white and black churches alike.

***Black Students: In Retreat from Religion***

It may be that as chairman of Afro-American studies and professor of religious studies here at the University of Virginia, and as lecturer in both fields on some 100 U.S. campuses, I have been made more acutely aware than most of my fellow religionists to what must be called a crisis in the black religious spirit. In any case, in the past three years I have witnessed the emergence of a strange phenomenon. Whether in the classrooms on this campus or the lecture halls of other colleges, I have found that surprising numbers of white students (who are nothing if not middle class) are deeply interested in the study and application of religion.

The University of Virginia is but one of many institutions whose courses in religion are attracting hundreds. For example, in 1968 the faculty of the University of Virginia’s religious studies department consisted of two full-time members; in 1974 there are 14. Concomitantly, the number of students majoring in religion has mushroomed from a handful to over 200. However, only two of these are black. At the University of Virginia as at other universities, mainline religion, while admittedly one of the black community’s most important institutions, holds the least interest for black college students.

Indeed, almost everywhere black college students are for the most part compulsively antireligious. They do join gospel choirs and (like their white peers) take part in fundamentalist movements, but these involvements call for action, not for reflection. What is worse, even such superficial concerns appeal to fewer and fewer. The point at which the black students’ retreat from religion will bottom out and start the upswing is not in sight.

The fact is that one would be hard put to find a strong, independent department of religion at any black college. Generally, religion is dealt with in the philosophy/religion department. This state of affairs speaks volumes about religion among middle-class black students, parents, alumni, professors and administrators. They all seem to view religion as unamenable to research and serious inquiry.

Interesting as it would be to explore the reasons why middle-class black and white college students respond to religion in opposite ways, to do so would lead us too far from the issue at hand. Let me say only that the paucity of black students taking courses in religion means that, if and when they decide on a church commitment, they will find themselves at a great disadvantage. This sad situation may have antiblack consequences. For the church, an institution of great influence and potential strength, can be an instrument of community.

The erosion of middle-class church membership could be explained away as just another indication that blacks are no different from whites. But that would be to underestimate the crucial importance of religion in the black community, to shake off black religion and black theology, and to disregard the portent of antireligious black youth and proreligious white youth.

Some argue that the black middle-class churches’ loss of vitality is proof of the failure of integration. They imply that at best a marginal segment of the black religious population can be brought into the wider church community, and that for each black successfully integrated, ten or a dozen will be lost to nonintegrated churches or, more often, to all churches. This line of argument leads to the conclusion that the only institution capable of appealing to the black masses is the black church independent of white denominations.

***Socialization Centers***

This is an argument that may have merit, but it does violence to the facts. While the black denominations do enjoy a large membership, their churches for the most part are growing neither numerically nor theologically. Why? Because in truth they are middle-class churches. They generally do not reach the masses of working people and underprivileged families who comprise the vast majority of the black population. Hence their only recourse is to take the defensive by way of black ecumenism. This would be a justifiable tactic if it could become operational. But notwithstanding their rhetoric, black Baptists or Methodists -- who enjoy the largest following and are the most middle class of all black churches -- have no incentive for uniting intradenominationally, let alone interdenominationally. A teal black ecumenism, necessarily growing out of profound theological conviction, would seek the economic, political, religious, cultural and social uplift of the great masses. Were there such a black ecumenism the crisis would not be upon us.

It will not do to blame middle-class churches for the crisis, to scold them for having lost their roots and their evangelistic fervor, to say that they have waxed too fat -- too institutional, professional and formal. The trouble with this diagnosis is that ever since Reconstruction black middle-class churches have neither intended nor pretended to be anything other than socialization centers, where charitable activities crowded out prophetic witness and community spirit (as the significant exceptions make perfectly clear).

The influx of blacks into the cities during World War II occasioned neither great growth nor sharp decline in the black middle-class church. Indeed, that church is a fixture, the quintessence of stability and respectability. What is different today is that it is no longer taken for granted as something to join. Up to the time of the civil rights movement, becoming a church member was the preferred way to gain identification and social status and to forward political action. But the civil rights movement opened up new avenues of opportunity for blacks. Hence fewer blacks of middle age and even fewer under 30 feel drawn to the black church as a place of belonging and comfort. In a functionally open society where black culture is free to flourish, the church has been edged out of the preferred status.

No wonder then that the people who look to the church tend to be the least imaginative, resourceful, intelligent, militant and dynamic. The black church continues to be the captive of the tradition-ridden.

The case of the mainline white churches is diametrically different. Their decline is in part the result of their taking the faith seriously by engaging in prophetic social action, thus making the church pew an uncomfortable place for many who had once found it easeful. Black middle-class churches, on the other hand, have generally turned a deaf ear to calls to faithfulness.

***More Style Than Substance***

A second reason for the decline of the mainline white churches is related to the first. Whites of the middle class (whether conservative Lutherans and Presbyterians or liberal Episcopalians) seem to "take to" theology, to such a degree that they will pay attention even to extreme interpretations of the gospel. This attitude accounts for the fact that of late many of them have moved away from the mainline churches to fundamentalist groups. To middle-class blacks, theology has been of less critical importance. They do not see Pentecostal or other fundamentalist groups as bastions of security or islands of peace. They are actually ashamed of lower-class blacks who engage in mass evangelism and media hustling. Indeed, they are apprehensive lest through such activities they be pulled back down to the level from which they so recently emerged. In short, it is not sound theology or prophetic social action but decorum and culture that black church members prize most highly. To them the church is a place neither of challenge nor of change. Its purpose is to keep alive a tradition for those who have arrived, a place where form is more important than function and style more revered than substance.

Events in the larger society, such as the civil rights movement, affect the black church only to the extent that they disturb its rhythm of automatic infusion. Otherwise the black church is relatively immune to social change. That is precisely what makes it special, different from white churches. It is like a tree planted by the waters: it will not be moved. And it is this obstinacy that has been its strength, generation after generation, and can be its strong suit in the future. But presently it serves to foster indifference.

***Too Middle Class?***

Another explanation of the failure of black middle-class religion is that it is too middle-class. This is a formidable argument. If the middle-class churches are to grow, they must recruit new members from among the mass of blacks, who, obviously, are lower-if not under-class. But the churches seem unable to relate to the masses. That point was brilliantly put in an address to 500black United Methodists gathered at Atlanta in mid-December 1973.The distinguished speaker admonished his middle-class audience concerning their attitude toward poor blacks:

You will work for them but not with them. Your heart will bleed for them but not your head or your hands. You will be their advocate but not their friend. You will sponsor them in their cause, but their cause is not your cause anymore. . . because you are middle-class.

But this explanation of the black religious crisis, while excellent so far as it goes, ignores several difficulties:

First, there can be no question but that black middle-class church people must participate much more energetically in the struggle to secure economic, political and social justice for the masses. In so doing, however, they will be increasing the pool of middle-class blacks and decreasing the membership (at least relatively) of middle-class black churches; for it is common knowledge that the faster blacks become middle-class the faster they leave the church.

Second, there is the fact that lower-class blacks want to become middle-class and middle-class blacks cannot become lower-class. Yet, instead of attempts to work through this dilemma, there is a sudden switch to romanticizing the masses and damning the middle class, as if to be both middle-class and truly black contradicts black reality. Thus the Atlanta speaker declared: "You [of the middle class] will extol their folk religion as the authentic experience of an authentic people, but it is not the religion you prefer or know best."

Third, inherent in the diagnosis cited above is the assumption that the problem of dynamism in black middle-class church life is a problem of class. But if that is the case, not only is there no difference between blacks and whites but blacks must choose between race and class. Class status undoubtedly involves some knotty problems. But to say that it is so determinative that the problem is not people in their class but their class in people is to say that people cannot prevail; and it follows that class must be done away with, and therefore the human. It follows further that apart from the masses, there is nothing authentically black in religion, theology or the church. The logical conclusion is that blacks must work to keep the masses down, so that the masses can continue to endure the suffering wherein alone genuine blackness lies. Thus, black religion is bound to the poverty of black life -- the only real black culture. On this premise, to work for social and economic justice and for religious and cultural quality is to work for the end of black middle-class churches and, eventually, of all black churches.

***Religion as a Means to Racial Advancement***

No, it seems to me that none of these several diagnoses of the crisis in black middle-class religion gets at the underlying cause. That is to be found in the meaning and function of religion in black life. Black students are on the mark when they say that religion is what black folk do when they are not able to do anything else. For blacks, religion is a spiritual force to prime the pump of survival, a means to the end of racial advancement, not an end in itself. Experiential at best, ethical at most and ethnic in the main, it is a survival tool that can be (and is) discarded when the individual no longer feels the need of the emotional reinforcement it can provide.

In a word, religion for blacks has been sheerly pragmatic. It is one-dimensional, however creative and powerful; a religion of the downtrodden, the despised and rejected. When blacks are down and out, in slavery, religion is freedom-loving and creative (as in the spirituals). But when slavery ends, the slave songs are cast adrift from their creative source. (Today the spiritual is primarily an art form.) Those who are on the upswing, who have cut their racial moorings and learned to live by mind rather than emotion, can find a resting place neither in lower-class religion, which offers only emotion, nor in middle-class religion, which offers neither mind nor emotion.

***Learning to Love and Loving to Learn***

The problem of growth in black middle-class churches will not be solved by their being emotional like the folk. (That dimension must be included, but the folk can do it better.) What is needed is knowledgeable laypeople and clergy. Thus, above all, the black middle-class church must foster love of learning -- something altogether different from collecting certificates and degrees. Loving to learn and learning to love are not in conflict, and both are indispensable for the black church to be itself. The black church is the black community’s only national Institution. It exists because the black community has called it into being. It has but one task: to serve the needs of the black community -- and thereby to serve the whole community and its Lord. Being the instrument of the black community and the touchstone of the black family, it must conceive of religion as the life of learning to love and loving to learn. To this end each black church can do three things: (1)acquire the techniques and use its resources to build up in the homes of its members a sense of the value of knowledge; (2)develop learning opportunities in the church; (3) underwrite financially first-class departments of religion in black colleges (or at least in one such college). However, this third step will improve black institutions of theological education only if the love of learning (the condition for theology) prevails there and in the family and the community, where the discipline of learning to love (the work of theology) is regarded as the ultimate joy. The church can enrich itscommunity action program, increase its social activities, make its worship more appealing; but if it does not foster learning in concrete ways, its decline is assured. There is. no other way to be and do its truth.

An emphasis on learning is the only means of securing leadership and followers among youth in numbers sufficient to reverse the present trend. It is not a short-term solution. Nothing can be done immediately by wishful thinking or assessing blame. Inculcation of love of learning is a long haul, one that only the black community can manage for itself. And in the process, the idea that religion is simply pragmatic, or a spiritual sop for the down-and-out who cannot think for themselves, will give way to the understanding of religion as the truth of imagination.

Knowledge or the love of learning is not the only power, it is the *ultimate* power in religion as in every other dimension. Critical knowledge of world religion and church history, thorough study of theology and the Bible, and, finally, rigorous thinking are minimal but essential means to keep a church alive and therefore respected. Such a church will be irresistible to rebellious youth and confused adults.

Let me repeat: the love of learning will not in itself ensure the growth of a black middle-class church, but without it in the equation there will be no healthy black middle-class church.

This is what the black church has to learn for itself. The love of learning has not been tried and found wanting; it has not been tried. Consequently, learning to love (theology) has yet to be tried. When that lesson comes home, nothing else of religious significance will matter any less, but learning to love will matter more.