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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Training Physics Teachers for Secondary Schools and Colleges Dr. Kailash Chandra	5
Opinions of Black and White Elementary Teachers about Economically Deprived Children Dr. John H. Cochran, Jr., Ph.D.	13
The Function of Religious Language in Ibsen's <i>Brand</i> Dr. Oscar Daub	23
The Intent and Importance of Black Studies Mr. Randolph Fisher	36
Some Effects of the Application of Computer Assisted Mastery Learning Techniques on Black College Students Dr. John W. Greene, Ph.D. and Mr. Charles W. Moore, M.A.	39
The Legal Quest by the American Negro for Equal Educational Opportunity Dr. Prince A. Jackson, Jr., Ph.D.	44
Durrenmatt's Heroes Mrs. Elizabeth Johns	63
Income Profile of Savannah Residents; A Comparison of the Status of Black and Non-Black Families Dr. Max Theo Johns	83
The Evolving Black Church Mr. Otis S. Johnson	101
Measurement of the Solubility and Solubility Product of Zinc Chromate by the Radiotracer Method Levone Kornegay and Dr. M. P. Menon	111
Quintilian's Modernity: Implications for the Nature of Educational Theory Dr. Joseph M. McCarthy, Ph.D.	116
The U. S. Bank and the Tarriff: A Jacksonian Dilemma Dr. John E. Simpson	123
Large Angle Oscillations of a Simple Pendulum A Computer Oriented Experimental Approach Dr. V. Anantha Narayanan, Winfred Verren, and Randolph Powell	127
Refraction in a Prism - A Computer Simulated Experiment To Calculate the Angles of Deviation and to Plot the I-D Curve Dr. V. Anantha Narayanan	131
Black Political Autobiographies; Panacea for a Race Dr. Hanes Walton, Jr. and Dr. Isaiah McIver	136
The Political Theory of the Black Muslims Dr. Hanes Walton, Jr. and Dr. Isaiah McIver	148

THE EVOLVING BLACK CHURCH

Otis S. Johnson

In a hostile "white man's world", the black man has been allowed an opportunity for self-expression and status in one institution — his church. With his structured social life in the church, the Afro-American slave could give expression to his deepest feelings and release his pent-up emotions, and at the same time, the freedmen before Emancipation found status in the church which shielded them from the contempt and discriminations of the white world. After Emancipation when the hopes and expectations of acceptance and freedom in the white man's world were shattered by exclusion of blacks, except on the basis of inferiority, he found his church, a world which the white man did not invade, but only regarded with amusement. The black church could enjoy its freedom as long as it was not a threat to the white man's dominance of social and economic relations. The black church, with its other-worldly outlook, taught the Afro-American to cope with his inferior status and pray for the release from deprivation and suffering in the next world.

The social and economic upgrading of the Afro-American and the direct action policies of some religious leaders suggest that the traditional theology of other worldliness and accommodation is becoming a less dominant feature and a "black theology of liberation" is being recognized.

Christianizing Slaves

From his earliest arrival in America, the Afro-American was stripped of his social heritage and his traditional social organization as the result of the manner in which he was enslaved and became the labor force in the plantation economy. All family ties and bonds of kinship were severed and African historical traditions were suppressed by whites.¹

In the Eighteenth Century a systematic attempt was made by the Church of England to Christianize Afro-Americans beginning with the formation of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. This society was clearly directed toward conversion of slaves, especially children, and was conducted under very carefully controlled conditions acceptable to white slave owners. Baptist and Methodist missionaries carried a Christian message to the Afro-American which was designed first and foremost to generate belief in a gospel of hope and future bliss, not to hold out the promise of an immediate end to earthly troubles.²

A study of the religious instruction in the colony of Georgia will give some insight into the methods of instruction and the difficulties encountered.

Less than three months after the legal permission of slaves in Georgia in 1749, the Associates of Dr. Bray allotted a small fund for instruction of slaves on plantations and created the position of

catechist. The fund yielded twenty-five pounds a year. An application was made to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel for an equal amount but the Society only voted to allocate fifteen pounds to this purpose. This came to a yearly salary of forty pounds. In 1750, Joseph Ottolenghe petitioned for the position as catechist. He was a convert from Judaism and, being born in Italy, had a knowledge of silk-culture. The Trustees appointed Ottolenghe to the position, it is believed, because of his aforementioned knowledge.³

James Habersham wrote, ". . . I hope He may be of Service in the Instruction of the poor benighted Negroes in the Principles of Christianity, which has often engaged my thoughts."⁴

Ottolenghe instructed the slaves for more than eight years. During that time a house was built (1758). He wrote:

I Have built a Large Room with a large Chimney for the use of these poor souls, the Latter extremely necessary for them who are of a chill constitution, ill fed and worse clothed, that many are not fit to be seen by modest Eye; and while in Summer we're ready to faint with Heat, they solace themselves round a large fire.⁵

Some masters were opposed to baptism in the belief that it freed a slave even though competent authority had decided that lawfully this was not the case. Ottolenghe held the position that:

Were I a Minister I would not baptize any as yet, because I have reason to believe that tho ready to repeat every Thing as they are instructed yet have very little Notion or Idea of what they thus repeat, and consequently a Parot might as well be baptize'd as any of them.⁶

The hardest task was overcoming the difference in language, capacity, and racial temperament. Ottolenghe wrote:

. . . our Negroes are so ignorant of ye English Language, and none can be found to talk in their own, yt it is a great while before you can get them to understand what ye Meanings of Words is & yt without such knowledge Instruction's would prove Vain & ye Ends prospd abortive, for how can a Proposition be believed, without first being understood? & how can it be understood if ye Person to whom it is offerd has no Idea even of ye Sound of those Words which expresses ye Proposition?⁷

As illustrated in Ottolenghe's description the Established Church, with emphasis upon a knowledge of the catechism for baptism and religious ritual requiring decorum, did not make much progress with the slaves. However, the slaves were drawn into a union with their fellow man and through the Christian religion a new basis for social cohesion was established. In addition, participation in the same religious services as their master's drew the slaves out of their isolation in the white man's world, even though the slaves were seated together in a

special section of the church.⁸ Among the earliest practices of the segregation of the Afro-American are those concerned with worship. An extreme case is that of an ingenious congregation which erected a partition several feet high to separate slaves from their masters.⁹

The slaves' reaction to their fate was one of submission. They wished only to find a meaning for their existence in the confusion and bewilderment of the white man's world. The Bible was the means by which the slave acquired a new theology. Selected parts were taught to them, such as the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and Biblical stories told in simple language.¹⁰

E. Franklin Frazier explains that the slaves were:

... taught that the God with whom they became acquainted in the Bible was the ruler of the universe and superior to all other gods. They were taught that the God of the Bible punished and rewarded black men as well as white men. Black men were expected to accept their lot in this world and if they were obedient and honest and truthful they would be rewarded in the world after death.¹¹

Thus, the Afro-American slave adapted the white man's Christian theology to his psychological and social needs. This adaptation can be seen in the sacred folk songs or black spirituals which were religious in sentiment and other-worldly in outlook. Various themes appear repeatedly in these spirituals, such as the idea of heaven and a judgment day and preoccupation with death as an escape from the woes of this world, loneliness of the slave and the comfort gained by "walking and talking" with God, and the fellowship experienced by slaves with their fellow men.¹² According to Joseph R. Washington, these spirituals represent the spirit of the "invisible institution" and lie outside of fervor related situations of struggle which ended in 1865. There were songs of great belief, maybe hope, but they were not songs of faith nor songs of a "growing body of critical theology."¹³

The Free Black Church

At the same time that the "invisible institution" of the slave came into existence, Afro-Americans who were free before the Civil War left the white Methodist and Baptist church organizations in which they had a subordinate status and set up their own churches. The first is believed to have been founded in Savannah, Georgia by Andrew Bryan; it was the First Bryan Baptist Church.¹⁴ Richard Allen, a freedman and a convert to Methodism, and Absalom Jones organized an independent black church organization, the Free African Society, when they were removed from St. George Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia for mistaking the section of the gallery designated for blacks. Because of their differences in opinion on church organization, Allen and Jones went their separate ways. Jones organized the African Protestant Episcopal Church of St.

Thomas, while Allen organized the Bethel Church, which became the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 at a conference in Philadelphia.¹⁵ Succession from Methodist Churches spread to many cities, and church organizations were being formed rapidly. Peter Williams, Sr. joined with other Afro-Americans in organizing the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Other denominational churches appeared; independent Baptist churches were being established in southern and northern cities; Protestant Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregational churches formed on a small scale.¹⁶

After Emancipation, the "invisible institution" of the slave church was absorbed by the institutional churches which the Afro-Americans who were free before the Civil War had established. The fused church organizations became the major form of stratified social life among the Afro-Americans. The black church became an agency of social control by condemning sexual promiscuity and emphasizing institutional family life. Through economic cooperation churches were erected or bought and mutual assistance societies were established by pooling funds. Benevolent societies were established to provide assistance in time of sickness or death and in 1898 there were nine in Atlanta alone.¹⁷

Preachers during Reconstruction became political leaders, but their careers in politics were brief because of the reestablishment of white supremacy in the South. Consequently, the black church became an "arena for political activities." Ambitious individuals could achieve status and the masses could vote and engage in electing their officers, at least in the church.¹⁸

The Effects of Urbanization

Beginning with World War I, the urbanization of Afro-Americans brought about a transformation of the church and the black outlook. Social organization was destroyed just as it had been with the Civil War and Emancipation. The Afro-American through these experiences acquired a new conception of his people and of himself. He was able to obtain slightly better jobs in positions of semi-trust and authority, he could vote, and his child was able to attend better schools. The result was a new system of social stratification where three classes emerged. This caused the church to adapt to the general outlook and religious requirements of the different classes.¹⁹

In a study by Drake and Cayton of stratification in black churches in a Chicago community, it was found that class for class, the black church was not much different from the white church. Five percent (5%) of the sample was upper class. The churches attended were mainly Episcopal, Congregational, and Presbyterian, all services being intellectually oriented. The lower class comprised over one-half (65%) and had less than one-third (1/3) male membership. It was estimated that approximately one-

third (1/3) of the church-oriented people in the lower class belonged to large lower class churches, one-third (1/3) to churches dominated by upper class persons, and one-third (1/3) to "store front churches." Thirty percent of the sample was middle class. It was found that the large Baptist or Methodist church was typical and that it was usually a "Mixed-type" church which incorporated both lower class behavior (shouting and verbal "amens") and middle class behavior (restrained service and a sermon with ethical content). Cults, which are primarily a reaction to the frustrations of urban life, were shown to attract a relatively small part of the black population with ten percent of all churches in the community in Chicago being of this type.²⁰

Urbanization of the black population has been responsible, in part, for the increasing integration of Afro-Americans into the mainstream of American life. With this increased integration, the social organization of the black communities has changed; consequently, the church has been affected by integration in several ways. First, the church is less a refuge as the Afro-American has been forced into competition with whites in most areas of social life.²¹ Second, one saw the emergence of gospel singers whose songs expressed the deep religious feelings of the black masses. One of the famous Ward sisters stated that gospel singing is popular because "... it fills a vacuum in peoples' lives. For people who work hard and make little money, it offers a promise that things will be better in the life to come."²² According to Frazier, they represent the attempt of the Afro-American to utilize his religious heritage in order to come to terms with changes in his own institutions as well as the problems of the world.²³

Third, and the most advanced element in the process of integration was the emergence of a new middle class. This group, while they rejected their African heritage, were rejected by the white middle class and therefore occupied an ambiguous position in society. Their reaction has been to abandon religion, shift from church to church, involve themselves in "spiritual" and "psychic" phenomena, or shift from Baptist and Methodist to Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Catholic.²⁴

Finally, as stated previously, the traditional theology of other-worldliness is becoming a less dominant feature of black religion. More importantly, as black churchmen are becoming more aware of the needs of the black man, they are introducing a "black theology of liberation". At present, black theology is admittedly in its incipient stages; it is not yet a well defined system of thought by any means.

The Gospel and Liberation

James Cone, one of the youngest and most prominent black theologians, holds the conviction that "the gospel is liberation." According to his former professor, William Hordern, Cone's

theology has made a vital contribution by forcing one to recognize that theology cannot be Christian unless it is identified with the liberation of the oppressed.²⁵ Cone makes vague use of the terms "black and white," but he insists that this ambiguity is indispensable.

. . . theological language must be paradoxical because of the necessity of affirming two dimensions of reality which appear to be contradictory. For example, my experience of being black-skinned means that I cannot de-emphasize the literal significance of blackness . . . And because blacks were dehumanized by white-skinned people who created a cultural style based on black oppression, the literal importance of whiteness has historical referents.²⁶

However, Mr. Cone explains that through his experience of blackness, he has also encountered the symbolic significance of black existence and how it is related to God's revelation in Jesus. He states the position that the universal has no meaning independent of the particular. In other words, the starting point for all talk about God and man in a society where color is the defining point of humiliation must be where blackness refers to black-skinned people who have been oppressed, and whiteness refers to the people responsible for that oppression. After a serious realization of the gospel and historical experience is reached, then the symbolic significance of black and white may be approached. Cone stresses the point that there can be no universal understanding of blackness without the particular experience of blacks, for by being black one understands the ambiguity of the black experience.²⁷

In regard to black people as the oppressed, Cone says that he chose blackness because of his experience and what it means in white America.

The focus on blackness does not mean that only blacks suffer as victims in a racist society, but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America.²⁸

Aware of the danger of compressing the gospel into one theme, which Cone has been accused of with reference to his statement, "His (God's) revelation is only for the oppressed of the land", Cone feels that he must risk this danger if he is to remain faithful to his understanding of the Bible and the struggle of the oppressed for liberation. Moreover, he states that every theologian must take his own central theme of the Biblical message and relate it to his historical situation. Hence, it will always be necessary to interpret the meaning of the gospel in light of changing situations. This new "data" as Cone calls it, enhances the significance of old meanings.²⁹

Cone states his position by saying that:

Black liberation is the new datum. Theology must now ask, what is the essence of the gospel in view of the op-

pressed and humiliated, the weak and downtrodden? I contend that it is the good news of liberation . . . God's stand against oppression is His affirmation that all men have a common humanity in freedom. This means that I cannot be free until all men are free.³⁰

The New Black Theology

Reverend Albert B. Cleage, at the opening talk at a conference on "Black Church — Black Theology" at Georgetown University in 1969 said that black theology is

. . . reflection on the black revolution that has been under way since the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation. It is now necessary for the black man to throw off the slave Christianity that is the source of black powerlessness. The preacher who talks of a future heavenly bliss is preaching an escapist psychology and drawing black men one by one away from a confronting of their sordid lot. Rather, let the brothers and sisters come together and through baptism break their identification with the source of evil, whiteness, in order to form a black nation that will take salvation into its own hands.³¹

Several other theologians expressed their views on black theology at the Georgetown conference. Among these was James DeOtis Roberts of the Howard University School of Religion. He observed that theology done by white "haves" doesn't touch the experience of black "have nots". He feels that the work of the black theologian is difficult due to the fact that he must use a method that is not only sensitive to the black experience, but conversant with the traditional framework of theology. Joseph R. Washington of Albion College feels that black religion will always be more action and community centered than worship and doctrine centered. "Soul" is the key to black religion. "There is no way to soul, soul is the way. The black theologian must develop a theology of freedom and revolution that is positive and intelligent," says Washington.³²

Preston N. Williams of Boston University School of Theology, felt that the black theologian must try to transform black life with theology. "While white Protestants and Catholics are laying the plans for unity, the black theologians must lay plans for the disunity necessary to be the bearer of authentic Christian values."³³

Rosemary Ruether of Howard University poses the question, What would be a theology that could be called black and still be a legitimate form of the gospel? She attempts to answer by saying that a black theology draws upon the specific context and historical experience of the Afro-American to reveal the universal of "biblical anthropology", that is, sin as alienation and redemption as restored community through grace. She continues by

stating that a black theology would show the many ways that people oppress each other because the black man understands, perhaps better than any man, the infinite duplicities of the oppressor-oppressed relationship. Ruether cites other theological themes that come out of the black experience. One such theme is power, not in the sense of oppressive power, but divine power. "Power is man restored to his integrity and creativity so that his actions directly and effectively express his soul. Power is participation in the making of one's destiny."³⁴

According to Ruether, black theology is also an affirmation of the goodness of creation. She uses the phrase "Black is Beautiful" to illustrate a restatement of the Biblical doctrine of man. When God looked at His creation, everything was beautiful. There was no exclusive standard of beauty; rather, it was left up to the individual to ascertain the beauty of the whole. Ruether adds that the cry "Black is Beautiful" is also a cry for redemption, for the restoration of one's natural integrity against the debasement into which one has fallen. A black theology is one of revolution, she says. It brings judgment upon a white system based on false principles and demands its overthrow; then the recreation of a new world based on brotherhood. She goes further in stating that the gospel is one of revolution because it calls for the radical conversion of man in society and history and points to man's collective sins. She concludes by saying:

The hope for salvation is ultimately the hope for the coming of the kingdom of God; the hope for a new man in a new world, where the oppressive structures of the present system have been revolutionized and a new era of peace, goodness and truth has dawned. This vision has always been central to black hopes, black preaching, and black music.³⁵

An attempt was made by the National Committee of Black churchmen at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia in 1969, to hammer out a common position on black theology.

The co-chairman of the committee, Preston N. Williams, commented on several aspects of the committee's statement. First, he explained that black theology exists because the Christian church has not spoken forth-rightly and relevantly to the black experience. It seeks to help black people and all victims of injustice to understand their experience with God and with each other.³⁶

William defines black theology as another of the many forms theology has taken and that it has all the faults and virtues of any other form. Black theology asserts that God's word for the black man and every man is freedom and liberation, says Williams, and the gospel, which is Freedom requires all black men to affirm their dignity as persons and all whites to surrender their presumption of superiority and end their abuses of power.

Added to the meaning of black theology is the idea that the black churchman must stand with the black community and when tension arises between the community and faith, he must make the tension creative, seeking to repair all damage done by racial injustice. Williams explains that the churchmen exhibit concern above all for spiritual power. The words of Eldrige Cleaver symbolized for the committee:

. . . the black man's determination not to remain passive while white Americans seek to enslave him. Committed to our Christian faith, confident of our own worth and dignity, we shall fight until our rights are secured and assured. Self-determination shall be ours. Christ has made us free, and by the power of God and our strong right arm we shall possess that freedom. Thus in standing firm for our freedom we shall be participants in the task of reconciling the world unto God.³⁷

Through slavery and the periods following Reconstruction, the black church was the one institution owned and controlled by the black community. Black autonomy was pioneered by the black church when it broke from white Christianity and formed churches and denominations. The black church became the center of the social and political life, but like the black community itself, the church has been ambivalent in its heritage and the perpetuator of black powerlessness. The black church has too often over-valued the dominant white culture and undervalued its own. With the advent of black technology, an attempt is being made to shape a religion of blackness in which the black person can recover his own soul from its oppression in this world.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), p. 82.
- ²Roscoe C. Brown, Jr. and Harry A. Ploski, (eds.) *The Negro Almanac* (New York: Bellwether Publishing Company, Inc., 1967), p. 794.
- ³James B. Lawrence, "Education of the Negro in the Colony of Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, XIV, 1930, pp. 41-3.
- ⁴*Ibid.*, p. 44.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ⁶*Ibid.*, p. 46.
- ⁷*Ibid.*, p. 47.
- ⁸Frazier, p. 9.
- ⁹Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *The Negro Church in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 205.
- ¹⁰Frazier, p. 10.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 12-15.
- ¹³Washington, p. 206.
- ¹⁴Frazier, p. 24.
- ¹⁵Brown and Ploski (ed.), *The Negro Almanac*, p. 795.
- ¹⁶Frazier, p. 28.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 32-36.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 49-51.
- ²⁰W. Seward Salisbury, *Religion in American Culture* (Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1964), pp. 464-65.
- ²¹Frazier, p. 71.
- ²²*Ibid.*, p. 74.
- ²³*Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ²⁵James Cone and William Hordern, "Dialogue on Black Theology." *Christian Century*, L XXVII (September 15, 1971), p. 1085.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 1080.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*
- ²⁸*Ibid.*
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 1085.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*
- ³¹John C. Haughey, "Black Theology", *America*, CXX, (May 17, 1969), p. 583.
- ³²*Ibid.*
- ³³*Ibid.*
- ³⁴Rosemary Ruether, "Black Theology and the Black Church", *America*, CXX (June 14, 1969), p. 686.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 687.
- ³⁶Preston N. Williams, "The Atlanta Document — An Interpretation", *Christian Century*. LXXXVI, (October 15, 1969), p. 1311.
- ³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 1312.