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## **RELIGION AND MINORITY INTEGRATION: THE BLACK AMERICAN QUESTION**

**JOHN UMOH**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

During the Watts rebellion in Los Angeles, a gang from another vicinity invaded the neighborhood of a prestigious Black Presbyterian Church, threatening to burn it down. The young Blacks who lived around the Church, most of whom had never been inside, protected the building with convinced dedication: "If you wanna burn down some White folks' Church, that's hip", they said to the outside gang leader, "but this is OUR Church, and you aint messing with it, Understand?". The other gang did and the Church was left unmolested.

Little need be added to the young Black's reaction to this "abominable sacrilege to underscore the importance which the Black American attaches to the "Black Church". To the Black American, the black church or black religion, as some choose to call it, serves the double function of spiritual edification and social support. Over the decades, the Blacks have come to identify with religion as an integral part in their struggle for freedom and selfhood. Faith in the Black Church and its liberating power is confirmed by the following statement made by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC) during the meeting of the National Council of Churches in Washington, D.C. on September 27, 1967: "We have discovered that in order to learn the truth about ourselves and our situation, so successfully covered over by years of hypocrisy and dissimulation, we have to make a decision unprecedented in ecumenical conferences under the aegis of the National Council. We must make the decision to divide the conference into a White caucus and a Black caucus", (Wilmore and Cone, 1979:19).

But to the outsider, the belief in Black religion and its power appears to be little more than empty pride. The Black Church, to such people, serves little more than a psychological support and emotional refuge for a people locked into a system of oppression with no way to escape. Similar notions have been held by such social analysts as William B. Welmreich. Writing about the Black movement, Welmreich (1973:8) referred to it as radical, since the primary role of the Church had always been



to serve as a place where Blacks could pour out their troubles and find relief and solace in an other worldly orientation.

Does religion serve any useful social purpose for the black community? Is religion assisting to promote social change in the black communities of this country, or is it, as some people hold, a means that inhibits the very progress and change for which the Blacks dyingly long? The answers to the following questions are the task of the pages that follow.

## **THE UNDERSTANDING OF BLACK RELIGION BY THE BLACKS:**

In our attempt to understand the meaning the Blacks give to religion as being both spiritual and social in nature, let us appeal to James H. Cone's (1969:62-69) definition of Black Power as "... the Spirit of Christ himself in the Black-White dialogue which makes possible the emancipation of Blacks from self hatred and frees whites from their racism". The spirit of Black Power, he continues, affects every major aspect of American life - economic, political and social.

Cone's notion of the Church as an agent of God in the world in social processes is fairly representative of the black community's. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the advocate of black consciousness, himself thought of religion as being no less social and this worldly than spiritual and other-worldly. It was Dr. King's (1958:72) insistence that the Christian Church must deal with the whole man, not just with his soul, but also with his body. Dr. King declared that it was his conviction that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried. Said Dr. King: "A religion that ends with the individual, ends".

Emphasis on the spiritual as well as human forces so much interwoven in religion did not originate, of course, with the black experience of the 1950's. The example of early social thinkers like Emile Durkheim, on the matter, is fairly well known. They regarded (primitive) religion as the expression in symbolic terms of the people's awareness of the social system upon which they are dependent for both the material as well as the psychic and spiritual necessities of life. That Max Weber related Protestantism in nineteenth century Western Europe to the development of industrial capitalism simply gives more credence to the social relevance of the religious realm. Still on the issue, Peter L. Berger (1967) found no line of separation between the



sacred (nomos) and the human (cosmos). With the co-existence of the sacred and the human, religion becomes the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant (Berger, 1975:28).

The understanding of religion from a human/social perspective was not a new dimension discovered by the Black Americans in the middle of the century but it was, instead, a return to century-old convictions which were already shared by their predecessors. The practical usefulness and function for which religion participation serves are many times intertwined with each other. As Kephart (1976) points out, there are real life considerations that influence numerous people regardless of religious participation: "Things were so bad with Black Americans in the 1930's that a feeling of alienation often prevailed. More than any other of his time, it was Father Divine who fought against alienation, and he was a superb practitioner. He could play the role of God... and through his employment service, or within his own economic establishment, they would have jobs" (Kephart, 1976:126). It is precisely this social Gospel that is at the core of the Black American Church.

Despite this flexible and progressive view of religion, opinions are still divided as to what religion can and cannot do in the area of social life in general, and that of the Black Americans, contextually.

### **CONFLICTING VIEWS ON THE FUNCTION OF RELIGION:**

Perhaps the most objective way of assessing the role of religion in Black American communities is to review the ideas of some prominent social thinkers on the matter. These views have often been divided into two extreme poles - the one group seeing religion as functional, and the other, as dysfunctional-with a fairly insignificant group claiming a middle-of-the road position. First, the functionalists.

In Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus's book (1981) on the role of mediating institutions religion is singled out as a prominent structure in mediating between the individual in his private life and the larger structures of the society, political, economic and social. "The dichotomy between the individual and his private life and the megastructures of society poses a serious problem leading to a high degree of alienation. Many who handle this crisis more successfully than most are those who



have access to institutions that mediate between the two spheres" (Berger and Neuhaus, 1981:3).

In recognition of the tremendous amount of the function of these institutions, especially religion, as the principal expression of the people's values, the authors advocate greater empowerment of these institutions.

In the long-time debate among sociologists concerning the role of religion in social change, Max Weber has become a classic example of those who hold the view that religion is a facilitator of social change. In his **PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM** he, again and again, returns to remind his readers of his purpose: "..... to clarify the part which religious forces have played in forming the developing web of our specifically worldly modern culture, in the complex interaction of innumerable different historical factors" (Living M. Zeitlin, 1968:128).

Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was probably one of the first to develop a theory of religion that was sociological in character. His primary concern was to understand the place and function of religion in society. His belief in the integrative functions of religion led him into asserting that " religion has always served and will always serve as the basis of social organization" (**Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion**, vol. 8-9, 1969, p.3). In this belief, he posited the necessity of religion for the maintenance of social order.

Eventhough the work of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) is said to represent, not a sociological interpretation of religion but a religious interpretation of sociology (what a mess!) his views bear important similarities to those of Saint-Simon. Superficial and dull as his analysis of the role of religion in society may be, because of the focus of his work, Comte still tried to give a well deserved attention to the unifying role of religion in society: The true religion is a religion of unity which realizes the fundamental harmony of groups and individuals (**System of Positive Polity**, vol.4, part 11, ch. 1). Such have been the views of social scientists who may be said to be representative of the positive and functional side of the spectrum.

While Karl Marx (1818-1883) may be the most prominent representative of the dysfunctional group today, he had been preceded by a host of others. Proudhon's antitheism though recognizing that one of the functions of religion was to "cement the foundations of society", was more convinced of the possibility that religions could



create false images of unity and thereby generate the opposite chaos. His antitheism - he, of course, explicitly denied being an atheist - derived from his profound awareness of the alienative functions of religion for man which he felt had become dominant in contemporary society (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *ibid.*, p.9). Proudhon simply foreshadowed Durkheim not only in his insistence upon the need to view religion as a symbolic representation of society, but also in his conception of the idea of God as being, above all, social.

The case of Marx is already too familiar. Looking at the consequences of religious beliefs for the masses, he recognised its negative function of support for the oppressed: It is the opium of the people. Like Proudhon, Marx emphasised, in the strongest of terms, the self alienative consequences of religious ideologies and viewed religion as at best "an illusory happiness". In line with this view, religion serves but one purpose: to inhibit social change. In answer to the question, whether religion does serve a mediating function in the Black American community, the views expressed above will serve as our frame of reference.

### **THE ADVENT OF BLACK RELIGION:**

The history of the origin of the Black Church can hardly be traced independently of the Black Movement which originated in the early 1960s, the success of which owed to the renowned charismatic leadership of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Both events are tremendously intertwined, each acting as cause and effect of the other. As Gary Marx (1969:100-105) pointed out in the *Protest and Prejudice*, opinions vary considerably as to whether the Church encouraged or inhibited black protest in the past. The events of the 1960's appear to indicate, however, that the ideology of the Church and its leaders was very much a part of the forward progress of the Movement. Welmereich (1973:8) also points out that Dr. King actually set the example that was later to be followed by other black ministers in the South.

Along with his emphasis on a commitment to non violence that was both spiritual and tactical, Dr. King's greatest contribution to the Movement may have been his urging of blacks to use the Church as vehicle for social advancement and for the realization of concrete political and economic goals.



Such promptings actually gave a new look on the Black Church and strengthened the solidarity vaguely conceived by its members. As to the evidence of the Black Church and Movement taking off the ground together, Dr. King himself while serving as Pastor of a local Baptist Church in Montgomery, said: As an expression of my concern with such problems as these (referring to the socially humiliating impact of the segregation policy), one of the first committees that I set up in my Church was designed to keep the congregation intelligently informed on the social, political and economic situations ..... and to sponsor forums and mass meetings to discuss the major issues (King, Jr. 1958:22).

What has actually come to be recognized as the Black Church today had clearly religious and political overtones at the time of its inception. It is in confirmation of this view that James H. Cone (in Wilmore: 1979, p.351) recognizes that "King was a model, having creatively combined religion and politics, and black preachers and theologians respected his courage to concretize the political consequences of his confession of faith". Describing the historical event of the arrest of a black woman in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955, Welmreich has given evidence of its importance because it demonstrated the power that blacks could wield when they acted together in a nonviolent form. Then he adds that it was not until 1960 that Black Movement began to gather the momentum it needed for the sustained offensive of the decade that followed, a decade which was to see millions of black people throughout the United States actively asserting their rights as citizens of this country.

Given then the distinctive character of the black church in recent years, it might be useful to assess the value of this movement to the Blacks at the individual level and at the level of the black community.

## **ROLE OF BLACK RELIGION:**

In an illuminating anthropological study of the black community in the Mississippi region, Hortense Powdermaker (1966:177) did take a brief look at various aspects of community life in Indianola. With regard to the church, she wrote: As I watched a deacon ( a "yard - boy" in daily life) play politics at a church convention, a laundress preside as president of the "Willing Workers Club", men and women from all classes put on shows and skits in the church basement, it became apparent to me that one function of the church's secular activities was the same as their religious role: helping the Negro to maintain his self - respect. Such statement would seem to sum



up what the black church (as opposed to mainstream christianity) is all about and what ideas the individuals hold about their church: It is the logical turning point for the affirmation of selfhood and identity.

The black church also serves as a centre for solidarity and support against the dehumanizing force of human arrangements, slavery, racist prejudice, oppression, poverty, injustice, and evils, which they have all known and still know either as a people or individually. This emotional liberating experience is confirmed in their conviction that "when we turn to the matter of Black spirituality, we see how special and how needed is the approach to God that the Black Catholic experience offers to us all" (the Liguorian, March 1985, p.3).

The liberation which the blacks achieve or, at least, anticipate through involvement with the Black Church, is not merely on the spiritual and emotional levels but in the area of politics and culture as well. Such hopes are evident in the Statement by the Theological Commission of the National Conference of Black Churchmen. After the chapter on black spirituality and the context in which Black Messiahship is to be understood, the statement proceeds to add that "Black Theology is a political theology. The encounter of Black people with God takes in the arena of history and involves ethical judgments and decisions having to do with liberation from racism, poverty, cultural, and political domination and economic exploitation. Black people see the hand of God not only in personal salvation but in social and political deliverance" (Wilmore and Cone: 1980,p.343). Such hopes are more than simple wishful thinking as they continue to affirm in the 1980 statement that their prayerful reflection and praxis are signs that the Black Christians are called to join the people of the Third World in the social revolutions of this century to overthrow every structure of domination and injustice.

This clearly reveals that the Black church and its collective religiosity have a strong political intent built into them. But the question may be asked: How much of such social, political, and cultural aspirations have, thus far been realized ? Or, if not, how far are they from realizing them ? We have been looking at what the hopes were and how they were formed. Let us now see what specific achievements have been recorded that might be the direct result(s) of the Black church experience.



## SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

One of the possible areas that could be of real interest to explore is the area of social integration, i.e., finding out if the Black church has in any significant way assisted the black community to be integrated into the mainstream. What we are actually looking at here is the issue of alienation Vs integration which could be used as a measure of black involvement in the society. Earlier on, Berger (1981:3) argued that certain institutions, especially the church, do serve mediating functions by helping the individual to deal successfully between his private life and the public affairs of the megastructures. Actually, only a thorough qualitative analysis would be able to do justice to this complex problem by way of assessing the degree of alienation or lack of it, that exists in the black community. Given the focus of this paper the attempt here is to reach a conclusion through what has been said and written by others concerning the issue.

It is impossible to talk of integration for the blacks without mentioning that for decades, infact, centuries, segregation and discrimination against blacks had been the only constitutional way to go in the American society. De jure segregation had been so effective that the blacks themselves became so much a part of the system that they never even envisioned the possibility of change until the arrival of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama. Both Blacks and Whites in the society were so used to constitutional segregation that it became an accepted lifestyle in public and private gatherings. According to Dr. King, "The schools, of course, were segregated; and the United States Supreme Court decision on school integration, handed down in May 1954, appeared to have no effect on Montgomery's determination to keep them that way" (King, 1958:21). So comprehensive was the segregation that the black man was simply in the society without being part of it. To talk of full and instant integration, whatever the means, after the evil had already taken root deep down into the people's system, is to expect a miracle which in this case would be next to impossible. As Dr. King himself pointed out, even after the ban had been lifted, some black American church were to be supereffective in promoting social integration for its black adherents, it still would take a minimum of cooperative response from the nonblack community for some measure of success to be achieved. Friendship is not only an offer: it is also an acceptance. Integration is a two - way street.

Therefore, to come to a conclusion that the American Blacks have not been fully integrated into the larger society, in spite of the Black Church effort, if that is



their goal, does not necessarily say much about the effectiveness or not of the Black Religion. It may even have more to say about the larger community than downplay the role of the Black Church. This is not to say, of course, that any degree of apparent nonintegration of Black 'is' to be blamed on forces outside the black community itself: perhaps, it is - perhaps, not. The issue is rather an open one for future studies and investigation.

One thing we have discovered so far on the function of Black religion is that it, at least, served the purpose of moral solidarity for its members. But as Berger and Neuhaus have already suggested, religion ought to serve a larger dimension which embraces both spiritual and social ends: it ought to reduce alienation and increase integration into the larger system through mediation. In a society like the United States, with the predictions of the inevitability of mass society with its anomic individuals, a structure that truly mediates - the church, the neighborhood, voluntary associations, etc. - should be the agency for the empowerment of people in renewed experiment in democratic pluralism.

But integration, in the case of the Black Americans, taking account of their experiences over the centuries, need not be understood only along the lines of full involvement at the macro level of the entire American system: such might be an untimely expectation since it generally takes time to overcome the handicapping effects of ghetto experience and start to live another, especially in terms of solidarity with one another and involvement with the social, political, cultural and religious activities within the black community itself. With this understanding, it would seem that the black religion has achieved quite a bit. Under the auspices of the black church, several organizations and movements have come to be formed, all of which had basically the same goal. In the area of racial solidarity, William B. Welmreigh (ibid. p.52) has indicated that the leaders of the crusaders felt that in order for them to be an effective political and economic force in the community, they had to develop pride in their identity and an awareness of self.

Racial and ethnic integration must, for practical purposes, be sought before national integration. The reason for this as well as its importance is pointed out by George Watt's (in William B. Welmreigh, p.53) remarks on black exclusivity. According to Watt, in the early sixties, it should be understood, that there was a trend that black folks "first" had to unite themselves.



The strengthening of group identity then among the blacks was only the most elementary but necessary beginning of a long process of radical social change. As Gary T. Marx (ibid. p. 161) in his examination of the role of religion in the Civil Rights Militancy has confirmed, religion has occasionally played a strong political role in movements for radical social change. It might also be true as Gunner Myrdal, et al. (1944:851 - 853) documented that the Northern Negro Church had remained a conservative institution with its interests directly upon other - worldly matters, and ignoring largely the practical problems of the Negro's fate in this world. Yet, as the consciousness - awakening campaigns of the 1960's were to reveal, the dual role of religion - spiritual and temporal - is also indicated in the case of the American Negro and race protest.

As it became increasingly clear that social injustice and oppression had been inflicted on them in the name of religion, they decided to fight back, also with the help of religion as their primary weapon. Religion, observed John Dollard (1957:248), was a mechanism for social controls of Negroes: it is also fitting that it serve as a mechanism for social change.

Relating back to the slave experience and the role of religion at the time, Gary T. Marx (ibid. p. 162) further makes the observation that while many Negroes were no doubt seriously singing about chariots in the sky, Negro preachers such as Demark Vesey and Nat Turner and the religiously inspired abolitionists were actively fighting slavery in their own way. So it is clear that the Negro religion was the very beginning of social integration. All - Negro churches first came into being as protest organizations and later some served as meeting places where protest strategy was planned, or as stations in the underground railroad. The richness of protest symbolism in Negro spirituals has often been noted. But beyond this symbolic role, as a totally Negro institution, the church brought together in privacy, people with a shared problem. It was from the church experience that many church leaders were exposed to a broad range of ideas legitimizing protest and obtained the savoir faire, self - confidence, and organizational experience needed to challenge an oppressive system.

In 1965, Daniel Thompson stated that the Negro churches were the nucleus of the Negro protest and that in religion, Negro leaders had begun to find sanction and support for their movements of protest more than 150 years (The Role of Negro Protest, *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science*, 357, January 1965).



The most concrete and recent evidence of this is the Civil Rights Movement which came to full swing in the 1960's but which actually had started some ten years earlier with Dr. King's pastorate in the small town of Montgomery in Alabama in the South. From the gathering of a few church ministers to discuss the Negro problem, it expanded to include all Southern pastors and churchmen, and within a matter of months, it had become an officially organized unit for all Southern blacks,

However, the specific role played by the black church in matters of social change is difficult to document with statistical concreteness. The issue has been argued with relative conviction by Gary Marx (ibid., p. 163). Marx observes that while there has been little in the way of empirical research on the effect of the Negro church on protest, the literature on race relations is rich with impressionistic statements. The only problem is that they generally contradict each other about how the church either encourages and is the source of race protest, or inhibits and retards its development. Some think it was central to the civil rights movement, and is the spearhead of reform: others think it exhibited a position of neutrality and lack of concern for the moral and social problems of the community. In the face of such contradictory positions, one could only say, not surprisingly, that "*omnia ex opinione suspensa sunt!*".

At the beginning of this paper, it was argued that involvement in national concerns and politics is a good index for integration or lack of alienation. The Blacks had been known to be very politically indifferent in issues of national interest. But such disinterestedness certainly seems, of recent, to be going downhill, at least since the 1960's. William Welmreigh (ibid. p. 108) speaking once again of the Crusaders and their relation to politics suggests that it would appear that the Crusaders were active politically in Central City in terms of campaigning for or against certain candidates. It was precisely as a result of their political involvement that they were regarded as a potential threat by the political structure in the city. It is clear, as he further states, that the Crusaders became involved, in varying degrees, in a total of seven different campaigns which included the following offices: governor, attorney general, mayor, United States Representatives, State representative, and State Senator.

## CONCLUSION:

The future of any organization depends, to a large extent on (1) the degree to which the organization has fulfilled, or failed to fulfill the purpose for which it was



originally designed, (2) the members' attitudes in terms of dependability on the organization, and (3) the external society's disposition to accommodate and integrate the organization into its system. These conditions hold true also for the Black American religion. If the Blacks feel that the Black Church Movement does fulfill their aspirations, or is, at least, on the way to so doing, then they are likely to hold on to it.

The main thesis of this paper has been that Black religion is something more than just a religiously - oriented organization or, for that matter, an opiate of the masses. It is a religious as well as a political and social organization. Much has been written especially on the political involvement of the Black Church in the Black people's historical struggle for justice in North America. Dr. King who was accepted as the model of the Black people in their search for self - identity and advancement, creatively combined religion and politics. This courage to concretize the poetical consequences of his faith was, and still is, very much respected by the black preachers, theologians, and lay.

As the Philadelphia Council of Black Clergy stated in 1968, one is not overstating the case by indicating that the christian religious experience has won the acceptance of the great majority of Black people: It is believed, from the experience of the Black American religion, that the institution of religion should be given greater attention in view of its role in cementing the social fabric and enhancing ethnic integration and social change.

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