

Not All Black and White: African-American Christian History and the Politics of Historical Identity

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Since the publication of E. Franklin Frazier's pioneering work, *The Negro Church in America*¹, both academic and ecclesial engagements with the history and practices of African-American Christian communities have sought to interpret the religious experiences of African-Americans as a coherent monolith. This type of engagement has had ambiguous and unfortunate results, not the least of which has been the historiographical and sociological disparagement of the history and heritage of African-American Congregationalist communities in New England. Historiographically, this violation has taken the form of a denigration of the unique fusion of African-American experience and Congregational sensibility. Sociologically, the denial of any real integrity and autonomy to these communities is seemingly *de rigeur* in accounts of African-American Christianity. In my estimation, these violations arise from a naive under appreciation of the need to grapple with the intersection of several powerful forces in American public life: race, class, and ethnicity when studying the history and practices of religious communities. Further, I believe that the very real consequences of these unfortunate naivetes and violations compromise the academic study of African-American Christian communities in general.

In this paper I will address the historiographical issues that emerge from what I contend is a flawed approach to the study of African-American church life and history. I will proceed by briefly giving a descriptive account of what I term the violation of the integrity of African-

¹. Liverpool: The University of Liverpool 1963. I identify this work specifically because in my estimation earlier works such as Woodson's History of the Negro Church (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1921) adequately recognized the diversity of practice, and the importance of geographic location to the character of ecclesial life.

American Congregational communities in New England by this problematic approach. This will be followed by a proposal as to how the category of ethnicity can redress the fundamental difficulty with the approach to African-American religious history that I am critiquing.

I

The axiomatic assumption that undergirds most engagements with the history of African-American Christian communities is that a true engagement only occurs when one speaks about the "Black Church." That is, the commonsense among many theologians, historians, and ethicists have been that if one wants to engage authentically African-American religious practices and discourses, then one must engage those which emerge from communions and traditions which are historically and distinctly "Black." By this, I mean those denominations and traditions which, in common parlance, are associated with the historically independent Black church movement. This has meant that most historiographical engagements have focused on the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches as the exemplars of the antebellum North, and those traditions which emerged during the Reconstruction era from the "invisible institution"²--notably the Black Baptist fellowships--when concerned with the South. The true test of authenticity has therefore been connected to the notions of independence and race. While certainly there has been notice made of African-American Christian communities which are part of "white" denominations, these mentions always come with a caveat:

"For all their high visibility and the distinctiveness of their achievements, black Presbyterians and Congregational activists clergy actually built upon the previous

²This phrase has generally come to refer to the clandestine meetings of African-American Christian communities under the plantation system of the antebellum South. The clandestine character of worship was precipitated by the proscription of gatherings by numbers of African-Americans which emerged throughout the South after the Turner revolt, and the discovery of the planned Vessey revolt. Frazier, The Negro Church in America, pp.23-25; Raboteau, Albert Slave Religion and the "Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South" (New York, Oxford University Press 1980).

decades of expanding African Baptists and Methodist church life."³

Consequently, even in those instances in which African-American clergymen who were members of predominantly "white" denominations lent a forceful voice to the struggle for abolition and civil rights, the authenticity of their voice was sought in places other than the communities in which they were nurtured and that they served. In my estimation this is a highly stylized, and mistaken, reading of the history of African-American Christian communities. While I certainly recognize and honor the place of the historically African-American denominations, I want to argue that their life and practice did not exhaust the well of authenticity in the African-American community.

In an accounting for this bias in the reading of African-American religious history the casual approach to the biographical narrative of the African-American lay persons and lay leaders immediately comes to the fore. By casual, I mean that this reading does not approach the narratives of these lay persons, and the public record of the lives of their communities (i.e., newspapers), as having the capacity to illumine the actual character of their existence, but rather treats them as sources of confirmation for a preordained conclusion. Thus, writers like Monroe Fordham, in his work *Major Themes in Northern Black Religious Thought, 1800-1860*, believe it possible to treat "independent black churches, and separate black congregations which associated with white denominations,"⁴ as if they are the same phenomena, when in fact the historical record demonstrates that these communities distinguished themselves from one another by conscious decision.

Oversights such as this are of more than passing consequence, particularly when one is engaged with interpreting the history of Congregational churches. It should be gainsaid that the study of this tradition depends upon an explicit engagement with the fellowships and

³Swift, David *Black Prophets of Justice: Activist Clergy Before the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press 1989), p.4.

⁴(Hicksville, New York Exposition-University Press 1975), p.13.

congregations which comprise them. In common language you can't talk about the Congregational church without talking about congregations. It is this recognition that I believe is absent in the "commonsense" of many in the field of African-American religious studies. I contend that attention to these sources--the narratives of congregations and the public record--paints a picture of African-American Congregational churches which challenges what I have been calling the "commonsense" of African-American religious studies. As a way of seeing how the lives and practices of these persons and communities make this challenge a review of a specific example is helpful.

II

The presence of African-Americans in Connecticut has been documented as early as the first half of the 17th century. Documentary evidence exists about the participation of African-Americans in the public life of towns within Connecticut from the early 18th century⁵. Although the evidence is sparse, reflecting the nascence of the study of African-Americans in Connecticut, what is apparent is the participation of African-Americans within the religious institutions of these communities⁶. In almost every case, prior to the mid-19th century, this participation was in the local Congregational Church. By the second decade of the 19th century discrete African-American churches began to emerge. The character of worship and hymnody of these religious communities were apparently, at least so far as the current state of research exists, the same as

⁵William D. Pierson. Black Yankees: The Development of an African-American Subculture in Eighteenth Century New England. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1988; Orville Hitchcock Platt. Negro Governors. New Haven: Tuttle, Moorehouse & Taylor, 1900; Papers of the Hartford Black History Project, Connecticut Historical Society, newspaper clippings file.

⁶Ibid., church file, Talcott Street Congregational Church file; church record of First Congregational Church of Hartford, 1800-1810 (Archives of the First Congregational Church of Hartford, Hartford, Connecticut); church record First Congregational Church of Farmington, 1800-1850 (Archives of the Farmington Historical Society, Farmington, Connecticut).

that of the larger community⁷. This was, of course, as a result of the fact that the founders of these faith communities were by this time New Englanders of some lineage. As well, this similarity was related to the fact that the nascent presence of African-Americans in Connecticut was conditioned by the institution of "household servitude." This is an important point, because it meant that unlike African-Americans who lived within the institution of plantation slavery, African-Americans in Connecticut did not, early on, form communities within which distinct cultural forms flourished. In other words, there were generally speaking no slave quarters within which slave culture developed and evolved.⁸ Consequently, the cultural forms that conditioned the religious thought and practices of African-Americans within Connecticut were "Yankee," through and through.

In addition to the preceding insights, attention to the narratives and other historical documents about the cultural and religious practices of these communities highlight two other important points. First, these churches were involved with the agitation for abolition, and civil rights (two hallmark activities for judging "authenticity" in African-American ecclesial life) long before they were served by the famous activist clergy to whom is attributed much of the impetus for the activism of these communities⁹. A case in point is the African Missionary Society (which later became the Fifth Congregational Church, and later the Talcott Street Congregational Church). This Church which was organized in 1826,¹⁰ and drew its roots to an ecumenical

⁷ Papers of the Missionary Society of Connecticut, Church Records Collections: Hartford Box, Faith Congregational Church folder; Faith Congregational Church 150th Anniversary Bulletin, 1976.

⁸ John Blassingame. The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York, Oxford University Press 1972).

⁹ Fordham, chaps. 1-2.

¹⁰ Papers of the Missionary Society of Connecticut, Church Records Collections: Hartford Box, Faith Congregational Church folder; Faith Congregational Church 150th Anniversary Bulletin, 1976; 1828 General Association Minutes, the Missionary Society of Connecticut.

African-American Christian community-the African Union Meeting House formed in 1819, petitioned for the formation of separate schools for African-American children in 1830.¹¹ This was a full decade before the noted activist J.W.C. Pennington took over the leadership of the church. The public record provides even more interesting information about this church.

During the first 14 years of its existence the church did not have "Black" pastoral leadership,¹² yet, the lay members of the church took a leadership role in numerous public and ecclesial activities. Laypersons such as Henry Foster, James Mars, and Henry Plato were involved in the administration of the African schools, the organization of benevolent associations, and in the drive for the franchise.¹³ All of these activities it should be recalled are hallmarks of "authentic" African-American communal life.¹⁴ What these activities suggest is that an exclusive appeal to clerical leadership which "may" have been influenced by Afro-Baptist or Afro-Methodist organization is wholly inadequate. Moreover, the fact that most of the membership of this church, during the ante bellum period, were life-long Congregationalists disputes the notion that only those African-American Christian communities affiliated with independent "Black" denominations were authentically active.

¹¹ This petition was granted and the first school was established in the First Colored Congregational Church (Talcott Street Congregational Church) in 1832. The first administrator of the school was Amos Beman, and the first teachers were Henry Foster and James Mars. All of these individuals were life-long Congregationalists. David O. White, The Fugitive Blacksmith of Hartford: James W. C. Pennington, The Bulletin of the Connecticut Historical Society, Vol.49, No.1.

¹² Papers of the Missionary Society of Connecticut: Hartford Box, Faith Congregational Church folder.

¹³ Among the signers of a petition to the Connecticut State Legislature to grant the franchise to Connecticut's "citizens of color," were James Mars, Henry Plato, and Henry Nott-all members of the Fifth Congregational Church (later Talcott Street Congregational). Connecticut State Archives-Rejected Bills: Box 17, folder 106 1843, documents 29 a&b.

¹⁴Frazier, The Negro Church in America, chapter 2; Swift, Black Prophets of Justice, chapters 2, 11-12; Wilmore, Gayraud Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious history of Afro-American People (Maryknoll, New York Orbis Press 1983), chapter 5;

The second point which these narratives reveal is that even in those cases in which the subjects are churches which were affiliated with independent African-American (i.e., A.M.E.Z), the cultural and liturgical practices were not radically distinct from those of the larger culture. The African Methodists were still discernibly Methodist. So observations like those of David Swift:

"There were, however, important differences in liturgy and in degrees or types of social activism. The liturgy of Presbyterians and Congregationalists stressed order and predictability . . . The liturgy of Baptist and Methodist churches, in contrast centered on the Holy Spirit,"¹⁵

simply misstate the situation. The differences and distinctions had much more to do with issues of doctrine and polity than with liveliness of worship, or authenticity of political action.¹⁶ In sum, the reduction of the differences between the African-American Congregational churches and the independent African-American denominations to who was "puttin' on massa" and who was not is simply wrongheaded and demeaning to the integrity of all involved. While it is certainly possible to provide additional instances, in which the specific narratives of African-American Congregationalists rupture the dominant narrative of African-American religious studies I hope that the contours of the problem have been sufficiently identified. It is here appropriate to offer an explanation of how this unfortunate situation in the study of African-American Christianity came to be.

The initial step is the identification of a methodological misstep which is frequently made in the study of African-American Christian life and practice. This misstep has to do with the failure of many in the field to adequately recognize the category of ethnicity in their work, and instead to rely almost exclusively on the category of race when trying to explicate African-American Christian history and practice. The result of this identification is that the African-American religious tradition is rendered as a monolithic phenomenon, and not as a multiplicity of

¹⁵Swift, Black Prophets of Justice, p.8.

¹⁶ Asher, Jeremiah Incidents in the Life of the Rev. Jeremiah Asher with an introduction by Wilson Armistead. (Freeport, New York Books for Libraries Press 1971); White, p.11.

religious practices rooted in discrete geographic locations, and in distinct cultural, and linguistic forms. The resulting narrative which emerges from this type of identification is one that recognizes a very limited account as the only authentic account of African-American Christianity. More often than not, that account is the one which emerges from the experiences of those persons and communities ensnared in the system of plantation slavery. This point is illustrated by the fact that authoritative works on African-American Christianity such as Gayraud Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*¹⁷, Henry Mitchell's *Black Preaching*¹⁸, and the earlier mentioned *The Negro Church in America*, all begin their accounts with a description of the religious practices of the Antebellum slave community in the South.

This initial methodological step overdetermines the narrative of African-American Christianity. It does this by glossing over two important features of the development of the African-American religion in the midst of slavery. First, the exclusive appeal to the "religion of the slaves," understates the social and legal milieu in which the practices were rooted. It fails to adequately note that the situation of the slaves both necessitated and facilitated the emergence of a distinct form of religious practice. The ubiquitous laws which forbade the congregation of numbers of African-Americans independent of official supervision, and the existence of the "slave quarters" created a context in which independent development should be expected. Second, the unfolding of the second Great Awakening concurrent to the appropriation of the Christian faith by a large segment of enslaved African-American communities almost necessitates a particularly lively appropriation¹⁹. Put another way, the geography of the second Great Awakening meant that any form of popular religion would almost necessarily be one filled with enthusiasm. It therefore begs the question to say that the nascent Christian practices of enslaved African-

¹⁷ (Maryknoll, New York Orbis Books 1973).

¹⁸ (San Francisco Harper & Row, Publishers 1970).

¹⁹ Donald G. Matthews. Religion in the Old South (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1977), chaps. 5-6.

American communities, and consequently African-American Christianity during the antebellum period were largely independent and enthusiastic. I contend that methodologically these two points are, too often, not taken seriously enough.

In making this last point I do not mean to devalue the innovations which these persons and communities brought to the Christian faith. Rather, I want to make clear why an exclusive appeal to this particular trajectory in African-American Christianity, as the only authentic example, is faulty. The fault lies in the failure to see that context does matter. In my estimation this failure is linked to an over dependence on the category of race. Race by definition is a discourse of monoliths. Consequently, any narrative of the religious practices of a community that is articulated within the confines of race will be a monody. The unfortunate corollary of this reductionism is that the very project of restoring the humanity, and unique historicity, to these persons and communities is compromised. It should not go without notice that while it is sufficient in many academic and ecclesial circles to speak about the "Black Church," one rarely encounters this same reductionist impulse when discussing the "White Church." Instead, conversations tend to be about mainline churches, evangelical churches, Lutherans, Disciples etc. You get the point. This difference represents nothing more than the continuation of the historical project of delimiting the humanity and agency of African-American persons which has characterized much of American history. In my estimation, it is necessary to move beyond the categories which underlie this denigration in the first place. It is here, in countering this ontology of race, that the category of ethnicity proves crucial.

The deployment of the category of ethnicity helps to make apparent a major underlying cause for the truncated approach of many to the engagement with African-American religious studies. A real engagement with ethnicity highlights the categorical confusion by many of the concepts Black, African-American, Black culture, and Southern culture. The unnuanced deployment of these concepts in the discussion of African-American Christianity collapses the distinction between race, ethnicity, and location specific cultural forms in such a way that an

incisive examination of the evolution of African-American Christianity is functionally occluded. Let me explain.

I have argued throughout this article that the logic behind African-American religious studies goes something like this: historically, Black cultural and linguistic forms are, and have been, distinct from those of the dominant culture. This distinctness has to do with the history of slavery, racial oppression, and the carryovers of West African cultural forms that echo on a subtextual level within Black culture. This distinctness evidences itself in the style and content of Black religious practice, i.e., worship style. Therefore, the proper study of African-American religion begins with those religious cultural and linguistic forms which are recognizably and distinctly Black. Evident in this logic is the common practice of establishing the concept "Black" as the rubric for interpreting African-American communal life and practice. What goes unnoticed is the very specific content of the idea of "Blackness."

Anyone familiar with the history of identity formation within African-American communities will immediately note that throughout the sixties, seventies, eighties, and depending on who is speaking the nineties, the term Black has not only been used synonymously with African-American (or Afro-American), but has in many instances been the preferred nomenclature for reference to the African-American community. As well, the keen observer will note the chronology of the term Black as a self-referential category. It emerged during the latter part of the modern Civil Rights movement-the mid to late sixties. This period is generally referred to as the age of Black Protest²⁰. It would also do to notice the general demographics of the Black community of that era. It is a historical fact that many of those Northern, Mid-Western, and Western communities which experienced growth as a result of the great migrations of the first half of the twentieth century experienced a demographic change, such that within a few decades of the beginnings of the migrations the Southern migrants and their children constituted an absolute

²⁰Floyd B Barbour. Ed. The Black Power Revolt. Boston: Porter Sargent Publisers 1968.

majority of the African-American population within those communities²¹.

Notice of these points brings some clarity to the content of the category *Black* by underscoring the ideological imperative, and the cultural assumption which infuse that content. The ideological imperative emanates from the fact that *Blackness* as an identity, in the context of the United States, was born in social and cultural protest. Thus, appeals to *Blackness* will necessarily privilege the language and practices of protest. The cultural assumption is, or better oversight, is about the culture which permeated African-American communities during the time when *Black* became the preferred nomenclature for those communities. The demographic impact of the Great Migration was that in commonsense discourse "Black" culture came to be identified with the now ubiquitous transplanted Southern culture. The consequence of these assumptions and imperatives was that by the time that significant numbers of works on African-American Christianity began to appear the proper study of African-American religious thought and practice began and ended with the study of independent Southern *Black* religion.

If I have not yet made clear the difficulties of this approach perhaps, a question will help. Does the fact of cultural similarity between African-American Christian communities in New England and the Christian communities of the dominant culture mean that by definition these African-Americans were inauthentic, and that their lives and practices are historically and ecclesially inconsequential? Unfortunately, in the "commonsense" of many I think it does. This is the violation that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

While this cultural and historical reductionism is problematic on the level of the telling of popular history, it is particularly problematic for the study of the historical religious practices of African-American Congregationalists in New England. This reductionism does not take seriously these persons and communities. Consequently, the opportunity to learn of the strivings of

²¹ An example of this demographic shift is Hartford Connecticut. Between the years of 1918 and 1924 the African-American population of Hartford grew by 150%. Virtually all of this growth was attributable to the migration of African-Americans from the South. 1910 United States census.

African-American Congregationalist in New England as they express themselves in readings of the sacred text, hymnody, and theological formulations is compromised. The *prima facie* denial of authenticity to the African-American Congregational communities precludes the type of substantive research necessary to identify the unique contribution these persons and communities made to the religious thought and practice within their cultural milieu.

Recognizably, the impetus for the trajectory in the field of African-American religious studies that I am critiquing has been as a reaction to the historic denigration of African-American cultural and religious forms. I do not believe, however, that this historic denigration is effectively challenged by putting in place a narrative which in its own way deprecates and denies authenticity to numbers of African-American persons and communities.