



Working to Connect Religion, Black Bodies, and Sexuality: What Black Churches Should Know, Part One

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The challenges of the twenty-first century push black churches beyond their comfort zone, beyond narrow readings of scripture and theology, and beyond practices that don't reflect the current socio-political and Divine moment. Those who claim involvement in and love for black churches need be aware of this situation. One element of this current situation is particularly troubling for churches - issues regarding black bodies. Poor attention to bodies has produced bad church policies and practices that literally and figuratively kill African Americans. Black churches face a crisis, a time in their history that will either solidify their importance within the collective life of African Americans, or render them irrelevant.

Thoughts on 'The Black Church'

The religious history of African Americans is rich and layered – represented by a variety of traditions that draw together elements of the African past, European contact, and religious practices encountered in North America. These traditions include Islam, African-based religions such as Voodoo, non-theistic traditions and, of course, Christianity. And it is the latter in the form of black churches that has captured most forcefully the collective imagination of the United States.

From its early years as a somewhat secret practice within the confines of “hush arbor” meetings and secluded activities, to visible institutions dominating the landscape of African American communities, black churches have forced their presence unto the socio-political, economic, and cultural practices of the United States. Anyone who gives attention to the creeds and doctrines of the many churches within the many black denominations will notice the manner in which black churches have sought, at times, to position themselves as the bridge between an often-hostile world and African Americans in need of assistance. Beginning with the dehumanization of slavery, those who embraced the Christian faith hoped to find in that tradition the wherewithal to make it through the brutality of racial oppression.

Drawing on what they gathered of scriptural stories – without full access to the Bible – and what they could make of the ethics and moral outlined in those stories and their African

traditional religions, early African American Christians attempted to make their faith “alive” and meaningful in a world that threatened to destroy them. If nothing more, African American Christianity in the form of black churches provided a space of survival – a location somewhat distant from the direct and harshest signs of racial hostility. In the context of this faith – whether in the “hush arbor” or in the independent black churches present as of the mid-1700s – African Americans rethought their relationship to themselves and the larger community in which they lived and worked.

Concerned with the spiritual welfare of African Americans and at times demonstrating attention to the socio-political and economic needs of African Americans, these churches have figured into the life experiences of many African Americans over an extended period of time. They have in a certain sense ‘housed’ a quest for deep life meaning – for a fundamental response to the hard questions of life: Who, where, and why are we? This story of protest (and accommodation) and gains made, and compromises made as well, based on a sense that Christianity properly practiced must have real world consequences is the story commonly told. It is the one most widely used to present the nature and meaning of black churches in the United States.

However, there are internal dilemmas and problems that hound black churches, and that provide an alternate depiction of these churches – their thinking and practices. And, this less widely presented story of black churches begins with an uncomfortable relationship to black bodies. Here body is meant to convey two intertwined meanings, the second of which is a bit abstract and perhaps more difficult to grasp. First, the body is the bio-chemical reality that grows, ages and dies. Second, the body is also the creation of language, and in this way the body is what *we say* it is as a creation of words, an image or a symbol.

Black Churches and Black Bodies

One would think the social and political commitments of black churches as they are commonly presented and discussed would mean a firm appreciation for the bodies of African Americans. After all, weren’t bodies the site of discrimination and the recipients of social transformation? Doesn’t both oppression and liberation have something to do with how bodies occupy time and space – what they have access to and what they are denied? Yes. Yet, this hasn’t meant comfort with the body based on a variety of factors including but not limited to: (1) narrow or incorrect exegesis while using scripture as a guide for life; (2) acceptance of oppressive social norms within churches; and (3) theological opinions of many black churches based on their interpretations of scripture and social norms.

Scripture

Even claims that *all* humans are “made” in the image of God – drawing from the book of Genesis – don’t always sustain a deep appreciation for the presence and activities of our bodies. This creation, as Genesis recounts, is flawed in that humans – according to the biblical story – stray away from the will of God vis-à-vis “Original Sin.” And as a consequence, the manner in which humans reflect God in their very being is damaged and in need of “repair.” God, through the Christ Event, provides the necessary correction – a means by which to move back into fellowship with God. Drawing from “Original Sin” (and versions of this doctrine) as garnered from scripture, many black churches harbor a deep suspicion of the body; and, this is only amplified through New Testament laments and warring against the body as damaged and prone to sin. While the Christ Event provides the corrective, according to black churches, it requires a surrender of this dangerous body. The

New Testament often paints a negative portrait of the body as the source of human trouble. And, proper relationship with God – or salvation – comes only through a rejection of the “flesh” and all it seeks and stands for. In other words, for many black churches, and black Christians in general, the body (the flesh) is the barrier between the soul and what the soul seeks (i.e., relationship with God). Hence, to achieve what the soul desires, many black churches promote a disciplining or denial of the body to weaken it and allow for the strengthening of the soul. At the very least, there is a deep suspicion concerning the body – what it wants; what it does; what it needs:

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. (Romans 6:3-7)

Or,

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live (Romans 8:1-8).

One’s ability to “control” the body – to restrict it – becomes a marker of one’s religious development and spiritual strength. But, this is done at great cost for some, for example, including at times limited attention to physical health – no monitoring of medical challenges and needs resulting in the weakening of the body due to preventable conditions. The soul maybe ‘saved’ but the body is ‘lost.’ The temple – as the body is at times called – loses its integrity and its fortitude.

Acceptance of Oppressive Social Norms

Slavery was based on the assumption that the physical difference between Europeans and Africans also spoke to a difference in intellectual, cultural, spiritual, and political value – with Africans considered inferior and of less importance. From that point forward, violence toward and general abuse of enslaved Africans highlighted this difference and targeted their bodies. This was justified from the perspective of many white Americans because enslaved Africans – through their black bodies – were considered to lack beauty, lack importance, and lack full humanity and intrinsic worth. General disregard of and discrimination against African Americans in light of their bodies continued after the period of slavery, through reconstruction, and into the twentieth century.

In certain ways black church thought and practice responded to this oppressive arrangement by highlighting the beauty and importance of black bodies. In the straightforward and

popular statement by so many: “We are made in the image of God, and God doesn’t make junk!” And Sunday clothing – the hats, the suits, and so on – the presentation of the black Christian’s best was also meant as a sign of humanity, of importance, and beauty.

There are ways in which black churches fought the dehumanization of African Americans by trying to make certain their bodies (and souls) survived. However, there are other ways in which these same churches (their teachings and practices) supported the oppressive norms of the larger society – norms that ultimately harm African Americans. Markers of this acceptance are clear and present, for example, in the color symbolism embraced within many of these churches: think of the stained glass windows with depictions of Christ with blonde hair and blue eyes in churches owned by African Americans. In this way, what Christians recognize as the perfect blend of divinity and humanity is cast in terms that separate it from African Americans and lodge it visually within the physical appearance of Europeans.

And, it doesn’t take much imagination to move from this visual image of Christ as European in appearance to the assumption that people of European descent are closer to God and therefore of more importance and value. Or, think of the negative color symbolism presented on too many Sundays in too many churches: “wash me white as snow!” Again this song and others like it provide a depiction of “whiteness” as pure and holy, and by extension blackness is presented as impure and “evil.” This is another example of negative depictions of color being placed on physical bodies and used to denigrate those bodies. In so many other ways, black church rituals and worship speak in subtle tones to this privileging of white and whiteness over against black and blackness – attaching both to bodies but only the former being given sustained and continuous importance. Additionally, black churches have often privileged European church music over that of music created by blacks. Further, death is represented by blackness such as items draped in black material, and the purity of Easter is represented by the overlay of white material on particular items including the altar.

All of this has had dire consequences for the perception and treatment of black bodies within these houses of worship. It has been difficult or at least contradictory for black churches in general to argue for their role as agents of physical and spiritual transformation when they typically hold in contempt black bodies.

Theological Opinions on the Black Body

Scriptural suspicion concerning and social restrictions regarding black bodies have played out in what black churches say and think – within their theologies. Theology is often defined as “God-talk” but this is much too narrow a definition and misses so much of what theology contains and attempts to accomplish. One can simply label it the articulation, exploration, and celebration of human experience defined as religious. Having accepted a negative story concerning the black body (scriptural eisegesis) and having embraced a socially constructed disregard for black bodies (social norms), too many black churches promoted through their doctrines, creeds, and practices a desire to separate Christians from their black bodies in order to preserve their “souls” and their connection to God. Their theology justified and explained this effort. Preachers and laypersons alike present a theology of disregard for black bodies every time they use stories from Genesis or the teachings of Paul to monitor and restrict the activities of the body. This can be as simple as demanding women dress in a particular way so as to not tempt men, as if the bodies of women must bear the weight of men’s desires and misrepresentations. Or it can entail written or spoken (i.e., theologized) justifications for trying to downplay the physical beautiful of the body because, it is suggested, this beauty, if too overt, can result in sin by thought, word, or deed.

The moral codes and restrictions generated make it extremely difficult to maintain a positive valuation of bodies. Even efforts to theologically celebrate the body, such as the already mentioned notion that humans are made in the image of God (i.e., *imago Dei*), often see no value in the body other than its theologically argued connection to God. In this way, the body can be spoken of in a generic way as valuable, but only to the extent we can point beyond the body, to the human's connection to a greater Reality. And all the time that this body exists, Christians must battle it to make certain it remains a suitable 'receptacle' for the Divine. This is the wrong approach.

Black churches, in order to be relevant in the contemporary world, must perform the best practices of the Christian faith and counter discriminatory practices on all levels. There is no benefit in embracing within black churches the discriminatory depiction of black bodies.

Further Reading

- Gary David Comstock, *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations*
- Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*
- Michael Eric Dyson, *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture and Religion*, chapter 18.
- Stacey Floyd-Thomas, et al. *Black Church Studies: An Introduction*
- Walter Earl Fluker, *Stones that the Builders Rejected: The Development of Ethical Leadership from the Black Church Tradition*
- Robert Michael Franklin, *Another Day's Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis*
- Horace Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches*
- Gerald Palmer, *The Church Has AIDS: Essays on Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, Taboos, And the Black Church*
- Peter Paris, *The Social Teachings of the Black Church*
- Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight Hopkins, *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*
- Marcia Riggs, *Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church*
- Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader*. See chapters 10 and 45.
- Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*