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THE AFRICAN SOCIO-CULTURAL PARADIGMS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK RELIGIONS IN THE AMERICA

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Abstract:

Development must be seen as a response to the total context of a given society. This response is determined by some external factors such as the context and by internal factors such as the peoples worldviews. The thought structures, the pattern of the meaning and the basic religious convictions are also influenced by the context. Traditional African culture is deeply religious and the central motive in this culture has been described as the search for unity, harmonious balance and community. Africans who were taken to America brought with them a diverse range of African polytheistic and Muslim religious traditions. These traditions were often syncretized with one another and with Christianity in America such that the diverse American religious traditions that trace their lineage back to their religious traditions played an important role in the struggle for their rights. This article brings into bear how these traditions formed the African experience in the America using the historical methodological tool. It therefore ends by tracing the African perspectives and the way forward.

Keywords: Africa, Socio-Cultural Perspectives, Development, Black Religions and America

INTRODUCTION

This work is about religious practices of African Americans in the United States. It refers to the religious and spiritual practices of blacks and people of African descent in the United States. Historians generally agree that the religious life of Black Americans forms the foundation of their community life. Before 1775 there was scattered evidence of organized religion among blacks in the American colonies. The Methodist and Baptist churches became much more active in the 1780s, and growth was quite rapid for the next 150 years until they covered a majority of the people.

After Emancipation in 1863, Freedmen organized their own churches, chiefly Baptist, followed by Methodists, other Protestant denominations, and Catholics, played smaller roles. By 1900 the Pentecostal and Holiness movements were important, and later the Jehovah Witnesses. The Nation of Islam and el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz also known as Malcolm X added a Muslim factor in the 20th century. Powerful pastors often played prominent roles in politics, as typified by Martin Luther King Jr., the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, and numerous others.

Religious Demographics

In a survey in 2007 by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, the African-American populations are found to be more religious than the U.S. population as a whole with 87% affiliated to a religion, and 79% saying that religion is very important in their life, compared with 83% and 56% respectively, for the whole of the US. The population is mostly Christians, with 83% of black Americans identifying as Christians, including 45% who identify as Baptist, Catholics account for 5% of the population. 1% identify as Muslim. About 12% of African American people do not have a religion and identify as atheist or agnostic, slightly lower than the figure for the whole of the USA. Peter J. Paris (1865-1920)

History of Black Religions in the America

In the 1770s, no more than 1% of the blacks in the United States were connected to organized churches. The numbers grew rapidly after 1789. The Anglican Church had made a systematic effort to proselytize, especially in Virginia, and spread information about Christianity, and the ability to read the Bible, without making many converts. Joseph J. Hackson (1975) says that some slaves brought traditional beliefs and

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practices, especially regarding Islam and in some instances magic, with them from Africa. No organized African religious practices are known to have taken place in the Thirteen Colonies, but there was a surreptitious or underground practice of Islam throughout the era of the enslavement of African people in America. The story of Abdulrahman Ibrahim Ibn Sori, a Muslim prince from West Africa who was made a slave in the United States and freed 40 years later is a testament to the survival of Muslim belief and practice among enslaved Africans in America.

In the mid-20th century scholars debated whether there were distinctive African elements embedded in black American religious practices, as in music and dancing. Scholars no longer look for such cultural transfers regarding religion. Black religious music is distinct from traditional European religious music; it uses dances and ring shouts, and emphasizes emotion and repetition more intensely. Many white clergy within evangelical Protestantism actively promoted the idea that all Christians were equal in the sight of God, a message that provided hope and sustenance to oppressed slaves.

Helped by the First Great Awakening (ca. 173 1755) and by numerous itinerant self-proclaimed missionaries, by the 1760s Baptists were drawing Virginians, especially poor white farmers, into a new, much more democratic religion. Slaves were welcome at the Baptist services and a few Baptist congregations contained as many as 25% slaves.

Formation of Black Churches (18th Century)

Scholars disagree about the extent of the native African content of Black Christianity as it emerged in 18th century America, but there is no dispute that the Christianity of the Black population was grounded in evangelicalism. Franklin C.L. (2007) opines that central to the growth of community among blacks was the Black church, usually the first community institution to be established. Starting around 1800 with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and other churches, the Black church grew to be the focal point of the Black community.

The Black church was both an expression of community and unique African-American spirituality, and discrimination. The church also served as neighborhood centers where free black people could celebrate their African heritage without intrusion by white detractors. The church also served as the center of education. Since the church was part of the community and wanted to provide education; they educated the freed and enslaved Blacks. Seeking autonomy, some blacks like Richard Allen founded separate Black denominations. Newell Owens (2014) opines that the Second Great Awakening (1800 20s) has been called the central and defining event in the development of Afro-Christianity. In his acertion, he states that Free blacks also established Black churches in the South before 1860. After the Great Awakening, many blacks joined the Baptist Church, which allowed for their participation, including roles as elders and preachers. For instance, First Baptist Church and Gillfield Baptist Church of Petersburg, Virginia, both had organized congregations by 1800 and were the first Baptist churches in the city.

Preaching and Evangelism

Historian Bruce Arnold argues that successful black pastors historically undertook multiple roles. These include:

- The black pastor is the paterfamilias of his church, responsible for shepherding and holding the community together, passing on its history and traditions, and acting as spiritual leader, wise counselor, and prophetic guide.
- The black pastor is a counselor and comforter stressing transforming, sustaining, and nurturing abilities of God to help the flock through times of discord, doubts, and counsels them to protect themselves against emotional deterioration. The black pastor is a community organizer and intermediary.

Raboteau describes a common style of black preaching first developed in the early nineteenth century, and common throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries:

> The preacher begins calmly, speaking in conversational, if oratorical and occasionally grandiloquent, prose; he then gradually begins to speak more rapidly, excitedly, and to chant his words and time to a regular beat; finally, he reaches an emotional peak in which the chanted speech becomes tonal and merges with the singing, clapping, and

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> shouting of the congregation. New Well Owens (2014-2015).

Many Americans interpreted great events in religious terms.
Historian Wilson Fallin contrasts the interpretation of the American Civil War and Reconstruction in white versus black Baptist sermons in Alabama. White Baptists expressed the view that:

> God had chastised them and given them a special mission - to maintain orthodoxy, strict biblicism, personal piety, and traditional race relations. Slavery, they insisted, had not been sinful. Rather, emancipation was a historical tragedy and the end of Reconstruction was a clear sign of Gods favor.

In sharp contrast, Black Baptists interpreted the Civil War, Emancipation and Reconstruction as:

> God's gift of freedom, they appreciated opportunities to exercise their independence, to worship in their own way, to affirm their worth and dignity, and to proclaim the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Most of all, they could form their own churches, associations, and conventions. These institutions offered self-help and racial uplift, and provided places where the gospel of liberation could he proclaimed. As a result, black preachers continued to insist that God would protect and help him; God would be their rock in a stormy land. Albert J. Raboteau (2001) in his write up says that

Black sociologist Benjamin Mays analyzed the content of sermons in the 1930s and concluded:

> They are conducive to developing in the Negro a complacent, laissez-faire attitude toward life. They support the view that God in His good time and in His own way will bring about the conditions that will lead to the fulfillment of social needs. They encouraged Negroes to feel that God will see to it that things work out all right; if not in this world, certainly in the world to come. They make God influential chiefly in the beyond, and preparing a home for the faithful a home where His suffering servants will be free of the trials and tribulations which beset them on earth.

Formation of New Religious Movements in the America

African-American Civil Rights Movement (1865 1895) and religion, Black Americans, once freed from slavery, were very active in forming their own churches, most of them Baptist or Methodist, and giving their ministers both moral and political leadership roles. In a process of self-segregation, practically all blacks left white churches so that few racially integrated congregations remained (apart from some Catholic churches in Louisiana). Four main organizations competed with each other across the South to form new Methodist churches composed of freedmen. They were the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (which was sponsored by the white Methodist Episcopal Church, South) and the well-funded Methodist Episcopal Church (Northern white Methodists). By 1871 the Northern Methodists had 88,000 black members in the South, and had opened numerous schools for them.

The blacks during Reconstruction Era were politically the core elements of the Republican Party and the minister played a powerful political role their ministers had powerful political roles that were distinctive since they did not primarily depend on white support, in contrast to teachers, politicians, businessmen, and tenant farmers. Acting on the principle expounded by Charles H. Pearce, an AME minister in Florida: 'A man in this State cannot do his whole duty as a minister

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except he looks out for the political interests of his people, over 100 black ministers were elected to state legislatures during Reconstruction. Several served in Congress and one, Hiram Revels, in the U.S. Senate. (1978).

The great majority of blacks lived in rural areas where services were held in small makeshift buildings. In the cities black churches were more visible. Besides their regular religious services, the urban churches had numerous other activities, such as scheduled prayer meetings, missionary societies, women's clubs, youth groups, public lectures, and musical concerts. Regularly scheduled revivals operated over a period of weeks reaching large, appreciative and noisy crowds.

Charitable activities abounded concerning the care of the sick and needy. The larger churches had a systematic education program, besides the Sunday schools, and Bible study classes. They held literacy classes to enable older members to read the Bible. Private black colleges, such as Fisk in Nashville, often began in the basement of the churches. Church supported the struggling small business community.

Most important was the political role, Churches hosted protest meetings, rallies, and Republican party conventions. Prominent laymen and ministers negotiated political deals, and often ran for office until disfranchisement took effect in the 1890s. In the 1880s, the prohibition of liquor was a major political concern that allowed for collaboration with like-minded white Protestants. In every case, the pastor was the dominant decision-maker. His salary ranged from $400 a year to upwards of $1500, plus housing at a time when 50 cents a day was good pay for unskilled physical labor. Increasingly the Methodists reached out to college or seminary graduates for their ministers, but most of Baptists felt that education was a negative factor that undercut the intense religiosity and oratorical skills they demanded of their ministers. Antha D. Butter (2007) adds that after 1910, as blacks migrated to major cities in both the North and the South, there emerged the pattern of a few very large churches with thousands of members and a paid staff, headed by an influential preacher. At the same time there were many storefront churches with a few dozen members.

Black Christian Denominations

African Methodist Episcopal Church

African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E) in 1787, Richard Allen and his colleagues in Philadelphia broke away from the Methodist Church and in 1816 founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). It began with 8 clergy and 5 churches, and by 1846 had grown to 176 clergy, 296 churches, and 17,375 members The 20,000 members in 1856 were located primarily in the North AME national membership (including probationers and preachers) jumped from 70,000 in 1866 to 207,000 in 1876 AME put a high premium on education. In the 19th century, the AME Church of Ohio collaborated with the Methodist Episcopal Church, a predominantly white denomination, in sponsoring the second independent historically black college (HBCL). Wilberforce University in Ohio, by 1880, AME operated over 2,000 schools, chiefly in the South, with 155,000 students. For school houses they used church buildings; the ministers and their wives were the teachers; the congregations raised the money to keep schools operating at a time the segregated public schools were starved of funds. After the Civil War Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (1834-1915) was a major leader of the AME and played a role in Republican Party politics. In 1863 during the Civil War, Turner was appointed as the first black chaplain in the United States Colored Troops. Afterward, he was appointed to the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia. He settled in Macon and was elected to the state legislature in 1868 during Reconstruction. He planted many AME churches in Georgia after the war.

In 1880 he was elected as the first southern bishop of the AME Church after a fierce battle within the denomination. Angered by the Democrats' regaining power and instituting Jim Crow laws in the late nineteenth century South, Turner was the leader of Black Nationalism and proposed emigration of blacks to Africa. In terms of social status, the Methodist churches have typically attracted the black leadership and the middle class. Like all American denominations, there were numerous schisms and new groups were formed every year.

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the AMEZ denomination was officially formed in 1821 in New York City, but operated for a number of years before then. The total membership in 1866 was about 42,000.1261, the church-sponsored Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina was founded to train missionaries for Africa. Today the AME Zion

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Church is especially active in mission work in Africa and the Caribbean, especially in Nigeria, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Angola, Ivory Coast, Ghana, England, India, Jamaica, Virgin Islands, Trinidad, and Tobago.

Baptists

Progressive National Baptist Convention

After the Civil War, Black Baptists desiring to practice Christianity away from racial discrimination, rapidly set up separate churches and separate state Baptist conventions. In 1866, black Baptists of the South and West combined to form the Consolidated American Baptist Convention. This Convention eventually collapsed but three national conventions formed in response. In 895 the three conventions merged to create the National Baptist Convention. It is now the largest African-American religious organization in the United States. Anthonio .T. Blys (2011) says that since the late 19th century to the present, a large majority of Black Christians belong to Baptist churches. Although there are some elite churches, generally the Baptists appeal to poorer women.

Baptist churches are locally controlled by the congregation, and selected their own ministers. They choose local men often quite young with a reputation for religiosity, preaching skill, and ability to touch the deepest emotions of the congregations. Few were well- educated until the mid-twentieth century, when Bible Colleges became common. Until the late twentieth century, few of them were paid; most were farmers or had other employment. They became spokesman for their communities, and were among the few Blacks in the South allowed to vote in Jim Crow days before 1965.

National Baptist Convention

National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

The National Baptist Convention was first organized in 1880 as the Foreign Mission Baptist Convention in Montgomery, Alabama. Its founders, including Elias Camp Morris, stressed the preaching of the gospel as an answer to the shortcomings of a segregated church. In 1895, Morris moved to Atlanta, Georgia, and founded the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., as a merger of the Foreign Mission Convention, the American National Baptist Convention, and the Baptist National Education Convention. The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., is the largest African-American religious organization put together by Bruce Makato (2011).

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was highly controversial in many black churches, where the minister preached spiritual salvation rather than political activism. The National Baptist Convention became deeply split. Its autocratic leader, Rev. Joseph H. Jackson had supported the Montgomery bus boycott of 1956, but by 1960 he told his denomination they should not become involved in civil rights activism (2004).

Jackson was based in Chicago and was a close ally of Mayor Richard J. Daley and the Chicago Democratic machine against the efforts of Martin Luther King. Jr. and his aide the young Jesse Jackson, Jr. In the end, King led his activists out of the National Baptist Convention into their own rival group, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, which supported the extensive activism of the Kings Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Giggie finds that Black Methodists and Baptists sought middle class respectability. In sharp contrast the new Pentecostal and Holiness movements pursued sanctification, based on a sudden religious experience that could empower people to avoid sin, and recover good health. These groups stressed the role of the direct witness of the Holy Spirit, and emphasized the traditional emotionalism of black worship (1976).

William J. Seymour, a black preacher, traveled to Los Angeles where his preaching sparked the three-year-long Azusa Street Revival in 1906. Worship at the racially integrated Azusa Mission featured an absence of any order of service. People preached and testified as moved by the Spirit, spoke and sung in tongues, and fell in the Spirit. The revival attracted both religious and secular media attention, and thousands of visitors flocked to the mission, carrying the "fire" back to their home churches.

The crowds of blacks and whites worshiping together at Seymour's Azusa Street Mission set the tone for much of the early Pentecostal movement. Pentecostals defied social, cultural and political norms of the time that called for racial segregation and Jim Crow. The Church of God in Christ, the Church of God (Cleveland), the Pentecostal Holiness Church, and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World were all interracial denominations before the 1920s. These groups, especially in the Jim Crow South were under great pressure to conform to segregation. Sylver R. Freg. (2008) noted that Ultimately, North American Pentecostalism would divide into white and African-

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American branches. Though it never entirely disappeared, interracial worship within Pentecostalism would not reemerge as a widespread practice until after the Civil Rights Movement. The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), an African American Pentecostal denomination founded in 1896, has become the largest Pentecostal denomination in the United States today.

The Holiness Movement emerged from the Methodist Church in the late 19th century. It emphasized "Christian perfection" the belief that it is possible to live free of voluntary sin, and particularly by the belief that this may be accomplished instantaneously through a second work of grace. Following the Great Migration of African-Americans to Northern cities after 1910, many also departed Christianity for other religions such as Islam and indigenous religious.

Islam

African-American Muslims

Historically, between 15% and 30% of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas were Muslims, but most of these Africans were forced into Christianity during the era of American slavery. During the twentieth century, many African Americans seeking to reconnect with their African heritage converted to Islam, mainly through the influence of black nationalist groups that preached with distinctive Islamic practices; including the Moorish Science Temple of America, and the largest organization, the Nation of Islam, founded in the 1930s, which attracted at least 20,000 people by 1963, prominent members included activist Malcolm X and boxer Muhammad Ali. Malcolm X is considered the first person to start the movement among African Americans towards mainstream Sunni Islam, after he left the Nation and made the pilgrimage to Mecca and changed his name to el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. In 1975, Warith Deen Mohammed, the son of Elijah Muhammad took control of the Nation after his father's death and guided the majority of its members to orthodox Sunni Islam. African-American Muslims constitute 20% of the total U.S. Muslim population, the majority of Black Muslims are Sunni or orthodox Muslims. A Pew survey in 2014 showed that 23% of American Muslims were converts, including 8% from historically black Protestant traditions. Other such religions that proclaim themselves as Muslims include the Moorish Science Temple of America and offshoots, such as the Nation of Islam and Five Percenters.

Black Hebrew Israelites

Black Hebrew Israelites (also called Black Hebrews, African Hebrew Israelites, and Hebrew Israelites) are groups of African Americans who believe they are descendants of the ancient Israelites. Black Hebrews adhere in varying degrees to the religious beliefs and practices of both Christianity and Judaism. They are not recognized as Jews by the greater Jewish community. Many choose to identify as Hebrew Israelites or Black Hebrews rather than as Jews to indicate their claimed historic connections.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is important to note here that Dynamic and creative exchanges among different religions, including indigenous traditions, Protestant and Catholic Christianity, and Islam, all with developing theologies and institutions, fostered substantial collective religious and cultural identities within African American communities in the United States. The New World enslavement of diverse African peoples and the cultural encounter with Europeans and Native Americans produced distinctive religious perspectives that aided individuals and communities in persevering under the dehumanization of slavery and oppression. As African Americans embraced Christianity beginning in the 18th century, especially after 1770, they gathered in independent church communities and created larger denominational structures such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the National Baptist Convention. These churches and denominations became significant arenas for spiritual support, educational opportunity, economic development, and political activism. Black religious institutions served as contexts in which African Americans made meaning of the experience of enslavement, interpreted their relationship to Africa, and charted a vision for a collective future. The early 20th century saw the emergence of new religious opportunities as increasing numbers of African Americans turned to Holiness and Pentecostal churches, drawn by the focus on baptism in the Holy Spirit and enthusiastic worship that sometimes involved speaking in tongues. The Great Migration of southern blacks to southern and northern cities fostered the development of a variety of religious options outside of Christianity.

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