

DECONSTRUCTING A THEOLOGY OF DEFIANCE: BLACK PREACHING AND THE POLITICS OF RACIAL IDENTITY

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THEOLOGY OF DEFIANCE: AN INTRODUCTION

This research project examines the history of the Black prophetic tradition within American Christianity. Furthermore, it will explore the many evolutionary characteristics of this concept that emerged as an identifiable *theology of defiance*. Black prophetic tracts, sermons, and theological hermeneutics are reflective of the often controversial history of the Black prophetic tradition.

THEOLOGY OF DEFIANCE: A HISTORICAL RATIONALE

As a reactive and proactive force in American civil discourse, this historically driven theology of defiance seeks to highlight what its practitioners consider to be a glaring cultural and socio-political disconnect complicated by racism, sexism, and political/economic exploitation. Thus in its preachments, writings, and epistemological instruction, this defiance motif seeks to challenge American ideas to address the difficult realities of American life for the benefit of people of color.

THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF DEFIANCE THEOLOGY IN IDENTITY POLITICS

This defiance motif challenged the prevailing Eurocentric paradigms of Christian theology and practice, particularly European oriented American Christian epistemology. In this vein, the theology of defiance was strongly rooted in racial group identity politics and evolved over time into a permanent feature in the Black religious and worship experience.

THE HOMILETICAL CORE OF DEFIANCE THEOLOGY

Its harmartiological assessment of slavery, segregation, and the systematic dehumanization of Black people centered upon condemning those hateful practices as being contradictory of the expressed pronouncements on virtue and fairness as outlined in the Sacred Texts, but also of America's democratic imperative that outwardly professed human rights as its stock and trade. Likewise, its soteriological center focused upon both the historical Hebraic saga of oppressed people, as well as the New Testament Gospels.

HOMILETICAL CORE, CONTINUED

Hence, the culmination of this tradition found itself expressed in the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, thus highlighting the essential archetype of oppressed peoples' collective salvation and communal liberation from their powerful oppressors. In its Homiletical and practical epistemological application, Black defiance theology offered a unique proscription for remedying those overtly discriminatory practices by placing the onus on the dominant white culture to either change its behavior by treating Blacks with dignity, or face the total annihilation of their society at a time of God's choosing.

THE HISTORICAL HERMENEUTIC OF DEFIANCE THEOLOGY

While many of them could not read, due to official slavery era sanctions that prevented them from doing so, they latched upon the aural/oral Biblical texts that they remembered from listening to Black plantation preachers: especially those stories that related to their particular predicament. These stories tales included the stories of Hebraic slavery in Egypt, as well as the hurtful Jewish experience during the Babylonian Captivity (Circa 586-516 BCE).

HISTORICAL HERMENEUTIC, CONTINUED

This conceived notion inspired many Blacks, both slave and free, to forge a dual liberation theology and communal eschatology that gave them the encouragement that they needed to cope with the continual humiliation that slavery often produced. In addition, it empowered free Blacks to take an active stand against discriminatory practices in the North that they deemed equally dehumanizing, especially those practiced by White Christian clergy and churches.

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES: THE SLAVERY ERA

The Right Reverend Richard Allen (Founding
Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal
Church, 1787)

*When you are pleaded with, do not reply as Pharaoh did,
"Wherefore do ye Moses and Aaron, let the people from their
work, behold the people of the land are many, and you make
them rest from their burden." We wish you to consider that
God himself was the pleader of the cause of the slaves.*

*If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love
the God of love, clear your hands from slaves.*

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES: THE SLAVERY ERA , CONTINUED

David Walker's "Appeal" (1829)

*Perhaps they will laugh at or make light of this; but I tell
you Americans! (sic) that unless you speedily alter your
course, you and your Country are gone!!!!!! For God
Almighty will tear up the very face of the Earth!!! Will
not that remarkable passage of Scripture be fulfilled on
Christian Americans? Hear it Americans!! "He that is
unjust, let him be unjust still:- and he which is filthy,
let him be filthy still; and he that is righteous, let him
be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy
still. I hope that Americans will hear, but I am afraid
that they have done so much injury, and are so firm in
their belief that our Creator made us to be an
inheritance to them for ever, that their hearts will be
hardened, so that their destruction may be sure.*

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES: THE SLAVERY ERA , CONTINUED

The Apocalyptic Sermons of Henry Highland Garnet (1843)

It is in your power so to torment the God cursed slaveholders that they will be glad to let you go free. If the scale was turned, and black men were the masters and white men the slaves, every destructive agent and element would be employed to lay the oppressor low. Danger and death would hang over their heads day and night. Yes, the tyrants would meet with plagues more terrible than those of Pharaoh. But you are a patient people. You act as though, you were made for the special use of these devils. You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers. And worse than all, you tamely submit while your lords tear your wives from your embraces and defile them before your eyes.

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES: THE SLAVERY ERA , CONTINUED

Garnet's sermon continued.....

In the name of God, we ask, are you men? Where is the blood of your fathers? Has it all run out of your veins? Awake, awake; millions of voices are calling you!

Your dead fathers speak to you from their graves. Heaven, as with a voice of thunder, calls on you to arise from the dust. Let your motto be resistance! Resistance! RESISTANCE!

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: BLACK WOMEN CLERGY REACTIONS TO SLAVERY

Abolitionist and Evangelist Sojourner Truth
(1851)

[T]hat little man in black over there say a woman can't have as much rights as a man cause Christ wasn't a woman. Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him! If the first woman was strong enough to turn the world upside down.....women ought to be able to turn it right side up again.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: BLACK WOMEN CLERGY REACTIONS TO SLAVERY

Abolitionist and Evangelist Maria Stewart
(1831)

America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against Thee.....You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress them as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; for I am firmly persuaded, that he will not suffer you to quell the proud, fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out upon you the ten plagues of Egypt.

DEFIANCE THEOLOGY: EMANCIPATION AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF BLACK CLERGY

As the nation moved past its sectional disagreements, and towards reconciliation and the resultant national prosperity of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, the great racial divide widened into a deeper and larger chasm. As former slaves, the establishment of Black churches grew as did the founding of several schools of theology (e.g. Virginia Union, Wilberforce/Payne Theological, and Howard). As emancipated, and now professionalized, clergy, the Black preacher was a powerful and independent voice to articulate the socio-economic, spiritual, political, and cultural concerns of Black people.

DEFIANCE THEOLOGY AND TWENTIETH CENTURY STRUCTURALIST IDENTITY

The overt defiance of Black pulpiteers took on a number of characteristics during this period. First, they addressed the social and political inequities that were prevalent in modern American society by highlighting the disconnect between the nation's highly democratic pronouncements and the reality of autocratic racism. Second, as professional seminary education became the standard norm for educating Black clergy, innovative African-Centered/holistic approaches to the Sacred Texts became the new paradigm for homiletics, pastoral care, and direct social action. Finally, as the women's movement grew into a sustainable political force, Black Womanist theologians and preachers articulated their concerns to the growing theological dialogue about gender equality.

MODERN DEFIANCE THEOLOGY IN THEORY: DR. JAMES CONE

Many of Cone's works, "Black Theology and Black Power" (1969) and "God of the Oppressed" (1975) highlight a number of intellectual constructs that served as the basis of the defiance motif. Here, the idea of placing Biblical history and culture within an Afrocentric framework was just as vital to articulating the salvific message as conventional Western theology had done for centuries. The twin "Black is Beautiful" and the "Europe is Not at the Center of the Biblical Universe" concepts also became crystallized within the homiletic styles of these clergy. Here, Black defiance theology took on a cultural, as well as political critique of the American and Western power structure.

MODERN DEFIANCE THEOLOGY IN PRACTICE: DR. JEREMIAH A. WRIGHT, JR.

[Taken from 2003 Sermon at Trinity United Church of Christ]

The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing "God Bless America," No, no, no, not 'God Bless America' [People should instead sing] "God Damn America"..... that's in the Bible..... God Damn America for killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating our citizens as less than human, God Damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme.

DEFIANCE THEOLOGY: THE BOMBASTIC ESCHATOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Dr. King's critique of U.S. involvement in the war in
Vietnam (1967)

And don't let anybody make you think that God chose America as his divine, messianic force to be a sort of policeman of the whole world. God has a way of standing before the nations with judgment, and it seems that I can hear God saying to America, "You're too arrogant! And if you don't change your ways, I will rise up and break the backbone of your power, and I'll place it in the hands of a nation that doesn't even know my name.

Be still and know that I'm God.

MODERN DEFIANCE THEOLOGY: THE AFRO CULTURAL CRITIQUE

This notion was primarily based upon the works of the Nineteenth Century Writings of Edward Blyden and Twentieth Century scholarship of Drs. Cain Hope Felder, Deotis Roberts, Kelly Douglass, and Charles Copher.

Examples of Afro Cultural Sermonic Tradition:

Since Mary was also a descendent of David the King like her husband, she also had a manifest African bloodline. Therefore, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth does not exclude Jesus from an African bloodline. As a descendant of black people through his forefather David and his mother Mary, Jesus was also black. He was a Jew of Black African descent.

And

As I conclude, I just want us to realize that our history as a people does not begin on a slave auction block in the antebellum American South; furthermore, our history does not begin with the European invasion of Africa; no, our history stretches way back, back to the great kings and queens of Africa, back to the great civilizations and cultures of Egypt and Ethiopia, Mali, Songhai, Ghana, and the Mossi states. We come from a great people. We come from great nations.

MODERN DEFIANCE THEOLOGY: THE STRUCTURALIST POLITICAL CRITIQUE

[Sermonic excerpt by Dr. Yvonne Delk]

It is a time of "Code Blue" when men, women, and children are sacrificed on the altar of a military god—by those who believe that national security, respect, and pride can be built by creating more and more armaments. It is a time of "Code Blue" when we face the reality of a nuclear war. People are frightened about the consequences of nuclear war because they know there would be no winners. Few people would survive. People are marching to affirm the right to life for themselves and their children. It is a time of "Code Blue" when the Klan still marches boldly in our midst. It is a time of "Code Blue" when violence and injustice become accepted as a part of the daily fabric of life. In this Babylonian-like time of "Code Blue," how do we sing the Lord's song? Will the times in which we live wear us down?

THE MARGINALIZED WOMANIST CRITIQUE

[1995 Sermon preached by Reverend Deborah K. Blanks, a U.S. Navy Veteran]

If the African American church of my upbringing and the community of faith during the seminary years was a safe haven that nurtured and nourished the life in me, then the Navy Chaplain Corps was the antithesis, and my first hand introduction to the double edged sword of racism and sexism. I had been raised to believe that people were innately good and would treat you with respect and goodwill. It would be safe to say that those who had charge over me at the Chaplains School were people who upheld the ethical tenants of the Navy; however, in the class were chaplains who wore the cross on the collar, but were unashamedly racist and sexist and made no private bones about it.

CONCLUSIONS

Whether the sermons were preached in the swamps of the Antebellum South, the urban cathedrals of the North, or in college chapels, Black defiance theology has served as a very important barometer to gauge the development of Black America's reaction to changing social, political, and cultural phenomena. While Black defiance theology has, in its particular view, "spoken truth to power" in order to facilitate the ideas of the Christian faith and American democracy, it is very easy to construe these notions as un-patriotic and anti-American.

However, scholars should analyze those homilies within the thematic constructs of defiance theology, its history, the uses of rhetoric and metaphor, and to whom the sermons are directed. In this way, the previously outlined four fold analytical framework for understanding this novel approach to sacred rhetoric provides perspective and context, thus allowing the growth and development of issues pertaining to sectarian dialogue and the meaning of faith in a complex society.