

The Black Church and the Radical Tradition

Definitions

African Methodist Episcopal Church: The AME Church is a Black denomination of Christianity founded in 1815. Many AME Churches participated in the underground railroad and aided the escape of enslaved people from the south.

Afrocentricity: A belief system that centers the Black experience and culture in one's worldview.

Black liberation theology: A school of thought in the Black church that combined the anti-white supremacy politics of the Black Power Movement with religious teachings of Christianity.

Kawaida theory: A philosophy that shares principles with Kwanzaa and centers the culture, experience, and perspective of people across the African diaspora. It believes in creating a logic of liberation grounded in affirmation and community.

What is Black Liberation Theology?

Black liberation theology began as an idea from 51 Black pastors in 1966. On July 31st, the group took out an entire page in the New York Times calling for a more aggressive approach to ending racism. The Black Power Movement was in full swing at this time, and the pastors drew inspiration from various racial justice groups. Black liberation theology combined the philosophies of the Black Power Movement with the lessons and moral guidelines found in the Christian Bible. Reverend James Cone said:

“At the core of Black liberation theology is an effort — in a white-dominated society, in which Black has been defined as evil — to make the gospel relevant to the life and struggles of American Blacks, and to help Black people learn to love themselves.”

The leaders of the Black church shared this idea, including publishing an ad in the New York Times demanding an end to Jim Crow laws and racism. Black liberation theology believes that the Black American experience is directly caused by white supremacy; this idea is shared with pillars of the Black radical tradition. Additionally, the Black radical tradition and the Black Power Movement shifted the Black church's perspective on non-violence and reconciliation, which are beliefs found in the Christian faith.

Christianity and Racism

The National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC) played an essential role in building a relationship between the Black Power Movement and the church. They believed that Black power was religious as much as it was political. The NCNC brought attention to oppressive power dynamics and its relationship with Christianity. These beliefs prompted debates in the Black church about militant vs. non-violent approaches to achieving racial justice. Maulana Karenga, who developed the *Kawaida theory*, led the conversation on this topic.

Karenga believed Christianity was essentially a white cultural expression that needed to be reshaped in the Black image. He saw religion as a tool of liberation that played a social role in improving oppressive conditions. Molefi Asante, another intellectual on this topic, said in 2007:

“The Christian church cannot deliver salvation for Blacks! The Church has imprisoned us... it has placed a white Jesus in our imaginations...and bound us to an ideological structure.”

These criticisms of the Christian faith sparked many discussions among Black church leadership. Some were in support of these criticisms, but some were also in defense of the Christian tradition. More conservative Black clergy viewed the political identity of Blackness as divisive and nonbiblical. They argued that God sees people's spirit, not race. The division between traditional Black clergy and more progressive thought birthed an *Afrocentric* tradition.

Afrocentricity and the Black Church

Afrocentricity in the Black Christian faith addresses a shared desire for justice among oppressed people. Many Black pastors, especially those in the *African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church* believe Afrocentricity is essential for Black Christians. Molefi Asante, who is the author of *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, believes that an Afrocentric way of life for Black people is beneficial to their overall health and well-being. For Asante, Afrocentricity is a tool of survival and a liberation practice.

An Afrocentric view of life is often mistaken as nationalist because of its roots in the Black radical tradition. However, an Afrocentric perspective is one that believes the white European framing of society is not the only way humanity can or should exist. It restructures Black people's understanding of their place in society and allows them to create their own reality. This is a core belief of the Black radical tradition.

One way the Black radical tradition remains alive in the Black church decades later is through music.

The Black Church Today

Negro spirituals, musical arrangements and chants created by African people trafficked into slavery, can be found in Black churches as songs of worship. When they were written, some Negro spirituals contained code or double meanings that formerly enslaved people like Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman used to help people escape. The Black radical tradition honors these legacies through music and incorporates them into various liberation spaces in the present day, including the Black church.

“The Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope”

-W.E.B DuBois

Although the radical roots of Black liberation theology are preserved in the modern Black church through song, much of the radical politics have died. As explained by Dr. Cornel West, when a wealthy Black class emerged in the late 20th century, poor and middle-class Black people were found to undeniably support them. From here emerged a growing conservative perspective that introduced the “merit vs. race” debate, which discredited the generations of white supremacy that explained Black people's conditions in society.

These sentiments made their way into the Black church where the Black elite would congregate and take leadership roles. Just as the Black church was once a place for resistance politics, it quickly became a place

for electoral politics. Now, the legacies of Black liberation theology and the radical tradition have been diluted as capitalism has opened access to its oppressive markets to Black people.

Exploratory Questions

1. How can the Black church revive the Black radical tradition in its ministry?
2. What role does capitalism play in the decreasingly radical politics of the Black church?
3. Why do you think the Black church has been a place for political organizing?

Sources

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