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The Invisible African American Renewal

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African American renewal, starting with slavery, has been ignored throughout American and Church history.¹ Most of the narratives follow the same pattern², highlighting the existence of slavery the Americas from the 16th century followed by the American independence and the Civil War/Gettysburg Address "Four score and seven years"³ later. What the chronology leaves out is, at some point in between these nationally defining events, African slaves went to church, learned the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and had spiritual leaders of their own.⁴ "The Negroes' religious life thrived in institutions that were often invisible to the white masters, and that are barely visible to the historian today (Raboteau 2004, preface X)."

Invisible Institutions

There are reasons why Raboteau calls the slave religious institutions *invisible*. Slave renewal was not even considered a movement because Africans were seen as inferior⁵ and slavery was an essential wealth-generating enterprise for European colonists⁶. Raboteau explains, "British colonists in North America proved especially indifferent, if not downright hostile to the conversion of their slaves (Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones* 1995)."

¹ "Until recently, the history of the Black Church was a subject largely ignored by historians of religion in America.. (Raboteau 2004, x)"

²The timeline from Britannica denotes the first Black leaders in the Northern states but not among Southern slave states except the Nate Turner rebellion, which is a perfect example of what type of news was worthy of recording. "The earliest African American leaders emerged among the free blacks of the North, particularly those of Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. Free African Americans in the North established their own institutions—churches, schools, and mutual aid societies. One of the first of these organizations was the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, formed in 1816 and led by Bishop Richard Allen of Philadelphia (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. 2019)."

³ <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/gettysburg-address>

⁴ "In the role of preacher, exhorter, and minister, slaves experienced status, achieved respect, and exercised power, often circumscribed but nonetheless real (Raboteau 2004, 318)."

⁵ "[The suggestion] that African culture was not advanced enough to endure contact with superior European culture was to imply that Negroes were an inferior people (Raboteau 2004, 48)."

⁶ "The English colonies take little care of their [slaves] spiritual welfare, and let them live on in their pagan darkness (Raboteau 1995, 19)."

Slaves were kept in ignorance. Their masters hoped the Christian message wouldn't make them rebellious or even worse; equal⁷ to their white brothers and sisters. The heavy chains of spiritual deprivation⁸ may have been too much for Anglican Europeans to bear. The Anglican church developed a doctrine that used conversion to Christianity as a justification to kidnap and enslave Africans.⁹ The precursor to English exploitation of Africans was the Portuguese, who ironically were exploring the African coast for gold, riches, and the legendary African king Prester John¹⁰. Instead, they found African Berber and Moors who were captured. "The Portuguese missionaries have undergone great labors, but with little success." The English followed a similar pattern of Christianizing the slave trade. "The first systematic mission to slaves was inaugurated in 1701 by the English Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (MacRobert 1988, 16)." During this period, African slaves were taught a white supremacist and slave compliance bible story with little moral substance. For example, MacRobert quotes a catechism written for slaves:

"Q. What did God make you for?"

A. To make a crop

Q. What is the meaning of 'Thou shalt not commit adultery?'

A. To serve our heavenly Father, and our earthly master, obey our overseer, and not steal anything. (MacRobert 1988, 16)"

⁷ "Black Christian abolitionists had cried out for more than freedom. They had proclaimed that God demanded equality for black people (MacRobert 1988, 34)."

⁸ "The negroes born in this country are generally baptized and brought up in the Christian religion; but for negroes imported hither, the gross bestiality and rudeness of their manners, the variety and strangeness of their languages, and the weakness and shallowness of their minds, render it in a manner impossible to make any progress in their conversion. (Raboteau 2004, 100)"

⁹ The idea that slavery was not wrong and preaching the Gospel to the Africans is an English duty can be found in the letter *To the Masters and Mistresses of Families in the English Plantations Abroad*. (Raboteau 2004, 101)

¹⁰ A Christian ally possibly from Ethiopia

African Response to the Gospel

The Africans were not as ignorant and shallow-minded¹¹ as their masters hoped. Slaves knew there was more to the Gospel story than they were allowed to know. It is hard to conceal how many times Jesus mentioned freedom, and Moses mentioned slavery in Egypt. The Africans forcibly re-settled in the Americas “recognized the gross inconsistency between the teaching they received about the loving and all-powerful God of the white man, and the reality of white indifference to their powerlessness and suffering (MacRobert 1988, 17).”

African slaves understood the blessed hope¹² in Christ, even if their white masters purposely distorted the Gospel message. Lucumi, a Christian slave from Florida, describes this confidence in God best when asked if he was glad to be in America where he was taught the Gospel versus Africa where people are often killed and “the devil, in the end, would have had you.” Lucumi replied, “Now, Massa, look’ee here! The Gospel is now being preached over the whole of Africa, and if I had remained there, what was to hinder me from being one who heard it as well there as here (Raboteau 2004, 45)?”

Slaves in America found ways to explore this new religion to the point that they met in secret to avoid suspicion. If slaves were involved with religion, it had to be regulated to ensure no egalitarian desires were encouraged.¹³ Why would a people who were stripped of their

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Titus 2:11-14 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

¹³ “According to another ex-slave, ‘the white folks would come in when colored people would have prayer meeting and whip every one of them. Most of them thought that when colored people were praying it was against them (Raboteau 2004, 214).”

humanity¹⁴ and condemned to living in life bondage risk their own skin to seek the God of their oppressors?¹⁵

“Slaves faced severe punishment if caught attending secret prayer meetings (Raboteau 2004, 214).”

Karl Marx thought religion “eases the pain of the real world by creating a dream world where all sorrows cease (McGrath 2013, 241).” Yet African-America slaves put their lives in danger by pursuing this new faith when they could have conformed to what was given to them. Their sorrows were multiplied as their faith grew, and their hearts yearned for Jesus Christ. They found something that was better than man-made rules and worth the cost of their very lives.¹⁶ Raboteau explains what religion to a Christian slave meant, “By obeying the commands of God, even when they contradicted the commands of men, slaves developed and treasured a sense of moral superiority and actual moral authority over their masters (Raboteau 2004, 318).”

African renewal was happening in secret, and there were various ways slaves kept this hidden from white people who would likely persecute them. First, they would meet in the woods, use the cover of night, or some other secluded place. Slaves seemed to use water to dampen¹⁷ the sound, which seems plausible. Slaves would pray and sing while “huddled behind quilts and rags, which had been thoroughly wetted to keep the sound from penetrating the air (Raboteau 2004, 215).” Raboteau reports these were called *hush harbors*. The most infamous tool was the

¹⁴ “The process of stripping the slaves of most of their culture was remarkably rapid. It began with the dehumanizing conditions in which they were held in Africa and then shipped to the markets without regard to differences of sex, age, family or tribe. Any attempt to retain and use their native languages was discouraged or prohibited (MacRobert 1988, 9).”

¹⁵ “Gazing back at their lives in slavery, former slaves affirmed that they had trusted in the Lord and that the Lord had delivered them (Raboteau 2004, 320).”

¹⁶ “The conversion experience equipped the slave with a sense of individual value and a personal vocation which contradicted the devaluing and dehumanizing forces of slavery (Raboteau 2004, 318).”

¹⁷ “However, because the human ear evolved to hear in air, water tends to muffle sounds that are otherwise clear in air. Water can also ‘bend’ sound, sending it on a zigzag path instead of a straight line (Robbins 2018).”

upside-down kettle with it “slightly propped up to hold the sound of the praying and singing from escaping (Raboteau 2004, 215).” An ex-slave recalled these clandestine prayer meetings:

“Meetings back there meant more than they do now. Then everybody’s heart was in tune, and when they called on God they made heaven ring (Raboteau 2004, 217).”

African Proto-Pentecostal Expression

Christian African slaves traded their safety¹⁸ to experience the Holy Spirit promised¹⁹ (to all who believe in Jesus Christ; who died for their sins²⁰ and was resurrected for their justification). The secret slave church meetings²¹ were a powerful display of the inner work of the Holy Spirit. They were organized and developed their own liturgy while they had to “assemble in the swamp, out of reach of the patrols (Raboteau 2004, 217).” The slave meetings had a remarkable resemblance to other Charismatic movements in Church history. “They early Quakers emphasized ‘Inner Light’ through the Holy Spirit and all kinds of manifestations of the Spirit’s work were evident: trembling or ‘quaking,’ jerking spasms, weeping, visions, prophecy and **faints**, and speaking in tongues (Anderson 2014, 23).”

¹⁸ Themes of slavery and freedom in scripture resonated with the African slaves. Rom 8:18-21 NASB For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its **slavery to corruption into the freedom** of the glory of the children of God.

¹⁹ Joel 2:29 NASB Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.

²⁰ 1 Peter 3:18 NASB For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit

²¹ “Many slaves..merely pretended to accept white Christianity while actually holding quite different views (MacRobert 1988, 11).”

African slave church meetings started with a communal gathering²² in a hidden location. They had a designated leader who directed the service, but any member could speak what pressing on their heart. “The speaker usually commences by calling himself unworthily, and talks very slowly, until feeling the spirit, he grows excited, and in a short time, they fall to the ground twenty or thirty men and women under its influence (Raboteau 2004, 217).”

There are remarkable instances of songs and hymn that were invented by slaves through a longing for heaven. These songs demonstrate the development of African Christianity that rarely is discussed or celebrated. “We prayed a lot to be free and the Lord done heered us. We didn’t have no song books and the Lord done give us our songs (Raboteau 2004, 218).”

*My knee bones am aching,
My body’s rackin with pain,
I ‘lieve I’m a chile of God,
And this ain’t my home,
‘Cause Heaven’s my aim.²³*

African slave preachers were extraordinary in their skill to preach, dared to push back on the European culture of oppression to blacks, and formed an iron will to stand firm in their suffering as the ancient Christians bore²⁴. Extraordinary indeed because slave preachers were generally illiterate! Raboteau gives an account, “I been preachin’ the Gospel and farmin’ since slavery time...When I starts preachin’ I couldn’t read or write and had to preach what massa told me (Raboteau 2004, 232).” The masters would use their unlimited authority to corrupt the slave pastor’s message to preserve the institution of slavery. “He say tell them [negros]²⁵ iffen they

²². “They would form a circle on their knees around the speaker who would as be on his knees. He would speak into or over a vessel of water to drown the sound. If anyone became animated or cried out, the others would quickly stop the noise by placing their hands over the offender’s mouth (Raboteau 2004, 215).”

²³ (Raboteau 2004, 218)

²⁴ Concerning the fire in Rome (64 CE), “Nero blamed the Christians, who are hated for their abominations, and punished them with refined cruelty (Gonzalez 2010, 48).”

²⁵ Negro replaces the more offensive term found in the original text.

obeys the massa they goes to Heaven but I knowed there's something better for them, but daren't tell them 'cept on the sly (Raboteau 2004, 232).” Evidence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the development of Christian leaders while under slavery conditions was impressive. Yet the slaves discovered the egalitarian hope of all humanity through the Gospel.²⁶ Christian slaves in America had to be extremely careful not to express, in the presence of white people, the idea of equality with white people before God.²⁷

Slave church services were lively in preaching, and many charismatic expressions were recorded for us to examine today.²⁸ This was a stark contrast to a typical white church service (pre-Pentecostal). During the early period development of slave religion, the Anglo response to the dancing and drumming, according to Rev. Morgan Godwin, “[was] nothing more barbarous and contrary to Christianity than their idolatrous dances, and revels, in which they usually spend the Sunday (Raboteau 2004, 65).” White Christians may have assumed that slaves were resurrecting some ancient pagan rites. Robert Anderson, a former slave, recalls the unique slave worship service. “Practically all of their songs were accompanied by a motion of some kind...the weird and mysterious music of the religious ceremonies moved old and young alike in a frenzy of religious fervor. We also had religious dances, which were expressions of the weird, the fantastic, the mysterious, that was felt in all our religious ceremonies (Raboteau 2004, 65).”

²⁶ Acts 10:44-47 NASB While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the **Gentiles also**. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the **Holy Spirit just as we did**, can he?”

²⁷ “The slave preacher who verged too close on a gospel of equality within earshot of whites was in trouble. ‘De Lawd make everyone to come in unity and on de level, both white and black. Massa Charles hears ‘bout it, he don’t like it none’ (Raboteau 2004, 232).”

²⁸ “The strong emphasis on rhythmic preaching, singing, moving, and dancing in the religious behavior of the American slaves has long been noted by observers (Raboteau 2004, 65).”

Were these fantastic expressions of spiritual revival by the Holy Spirit or old remnants of pagan rivalries²⁹?

The slave men and women were stripped of all culture and identity once they chained in the bowels of the slave ship.³⁰ Once in America, they were separated from every tribe, tongue, and skin tone and sold on the market. There is beauty in this tragic tale of agony and oppression of a people stolen and abused. The slaves produced something that wasn't African³¹, but African American. "The new situation was important in influencing slaves to develop a new world view and a new culture (Raboteau 2004, 86)." The charismatic expression of early slave religion was the indwelling Holy Spirit, the same the Jews received at Pentecost. An ex-slave preacher said it well.

God saw our need and came to us. I used to wonder what made people shout but now I don't. There is a joy on the inside and it wells up so strong that we can't keep still. It is fire in the bones. Any time that fire touches a man, he will jump (Raboteau 2004, 64).

Azusa Street Revival

William Seymour was born to ex-slave parents. His father fought in the Union army during the Civil War. After losing his father to illness, he was set on a path³² that would lead him to infamous Azusa Street revival³³. On the journey to Azusa Street, William met Charles Parham, who developed a theology on the "baptism in the Spirit with the Biblical evidence of

²⁹ "The unusual religious behavior of slaves at camp meetings aroused the disapproval of Christian evangelists (Raboteau 2004, 67)."

³⁰ The roots of Pentecostalism: Black American Christianity (MacRobert 1988, 9)

³¹ "While it is true that Africa influenced black culture in the United States, it is also true that African theology and African ritual did not endure to the extent that it did in Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil. In the United States the gods of Africa died (Raboteau 2004, 86)."

³² "It was not yet common for slaves of their children to leave the South (Robeck 2006, 25)."

³³ "William J. Seymour, the African American pastor of the Azusa Street Mission, was the son of former slaves (Robeck 2006, 4)."

speaking in other tongues [and] emphasis on divine healing (Robeck 2006, 49-50).” Ironically, the meetings in which Parham taught were racially segregated, and it was nearly impossible for Seymour to attend classes under Jim Crow laws of Texas. “Seymour had been excluded from seeking baptism in the Holy Spirit at the altar of one of Parham’s meetings because Parham did not allow for a racially integrated altar (Robeck 2006, 47).”

Despite the setbacks in Texas, Seymour continued his journey to Los Angeles (the year 1906), where he had an encounter with God after praying for the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. “He fell to the floor as if unconscious and began speaking in tongues (Anderson 2014, 41).” The house where they were staying soon became too small due to the influx of new arrivals, including whites, who eagerly wanted to experience the Holy Spirit. “Within a week they had rented and moved into an old building used for storage at 312 Azusa Street, a former African Methodist Episcopal church, where the Apostolic Faith Mission was born (Anderson 2014, 41).”

Azusa Street revival exploded on the world stage; at the same time, a powerful earthquake decimated San Francisco. “It was the morning of the great San Francisco earthquake, and many of the mission’s participants saw both events as signs that God was intervening in everyday California life (Robeck 2006, 6).” Many people in California and beyond were focused on Azusa. Could this be God pouring out His Spirit just like in the Bible or a coincidence? Robeck tells us concerning Pentecostals and Charismatics around the world, “Since 1906 when the mission first came onto the world’s stage, there are those who were part of Azusa Street mission and revival, and there are those who wish they had been (Robeck 2006, 2).” The Gospel message was preached locally in Los Angeles and probably beyond what Seymour could have imagined. “The Revival reached out to the rest of the world with a rapidity that is hard to imagine (Robeck 2006, 187).”

The same (Pentecostal) Spirit that was on the Apostles and that later welcomed Gentiles into the forgiveness of God through the blood of Jesus was poured out there at Azusa.³⁴ The ecumenical traits of Christian forbearance were evident by the press and others from many different denominations. There was a spirit of equality among them and a classless attitude which was refreshing against the backdrop of a racist society. Robeck explains the theology of Azusa Street lead by Seymour, “The freedom it granted all people, regardless of race, gender, or station in life, to be treated as equals. They received criticism from the surrounding culture³⁵ because of the blurred racial lines. Seymour persevered in the face of racism. This movement was nearly identical to the slave meetings and rivals of the past.³⁶ “Parham referred to Azusa Street as making him ‘sick at my stomach...to see white people imitating unintelligent, crude negrosims of the Southland, and laying it on the Holy Ghost (Anderson 2014, 42).” Seymour held to the vision that God gave him, and the Holy Spirit confirmed. He believed that "If there was to be only one true church, then it must encompass all races and colors (MacRobert 1988, 50).”

Conclusion

Through grinding crucible³⁷ of life, the African Christians overcame the world and became something new through spiritual renewal that blessed the entire world. Raboteau teaches us how God has worked in African American history, “The Christian believes that God acts in

³⁴ The media heavily covered the Azusa Street revival. Los Angeles Record - “The ‘gift of tongues’ craze, which started two months ago in a barn-like building in Azusa has caused more than one war among the various religious denominations of the city since its noisy introduction. From the beginning, the crowds that gathered nightly at Azusa St. were made up of many churches and many sects (Robeck 2006, 187).”

³⁵ “The doctrine of white superiority and supremacy was propounded by many white church leaders, scientists, and the press (MacRobert 1988, 50).”

³⁶ “Pentecostal services of the twentieth century, black participants were generally nosier, more active and displayed greater spontaneity, rhythm, dance and enthusiastic motor behavior than their white counterparts (MacRobert 1988, 29).”

³⁷ (MacRobert 1988, 10)

history. In my study of African American history, I have been moved by the pervasive faith of black Christians that God was acting in their own history (Raboteau 1995, 14).” Some may ask what has explicitly been developed³⁸ and delivered to the world by the invisible³⁹ African renewal leaders? “The darker race would develop a classless, raceless, and weaponless Christianity that would welcome the return of the Universal Christ (Raboteau 1995, 13).” The egalitarianism typical with a biblical outpouring and the racist backlash that occurred “illustrate that the type of behavior taking place at Azusa Street was that which was already common in Black Christianity (MacRobert 1988, 79).” Treadwell recounts a sermon given by Richard Allen, a former slave, that shows the Christian Orthopraxy, Christian Orthodoxy, and Christian Orthopathy developed by slaves and a nearly forgotten part of Christian History. The continual unbroken line of African American renewal should be celebrated and highlighted in Christian gatherings. What an excellent demonstration of forgiveness and unshakable faith the slaves had in Jesus Christ.

*That God who knows the hearts of all men, and the propensity of a slave to hate his oppressor, hath strictly forbidden it to his chosen people, "Thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, because thou wast a stranger in his land." Deut. 23. 7. The meek and humble Jesus, the great pattern of humanity, and every other virtue that can adorn and dignify men, hath commanded to love our enemies, **to do good to them that hate and spitefully use us.** I feel the obligations, I wish to impress them on the minds of our colored brethren, and **that we may all forgive you,** as we wish to be forgiven, we think it a great mercy to **have all anger and bitterness removed from our minds;** I appeal to your own feelings, if it is not very disquieting to feel yourselves under dominion of wrathful disposition.⁴⁰*

³⁸ Black Christianity and Proto-Pentecostalism “had developed as part of the bi-cultural synthesis which had taken place during slavery (MacRobert 1988, 79).”

³⁹ “Therefore it has become the duty of the historians to research if Negroes: worshiped no gods upon coming to America; worshiped gods culturally linked to African traditions; **or worshiped in a clandestine fashion outside of white influences** (Treadwell 2017, 12).”

⁴⁰ (Treadwell 2017, 14)

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