Understanding the Black Church:
The Dynamics of Change

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The black church is one of the most enduring black institutions. It is also one of the most enigmatic. It can be in the vanguard for social change or can be a stubborn antagonist to that change. Frequently, both attitudes appear simultaneously in relation to the same or different issues. For instance, during the 1950–1960 Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., one segment of the black church community was a radical protagonist for black rights. At the same time, symbolized by the National Baptist Convention under the leadership of J. H. Jackson, another segment of the black church community remained virtually uninvolved in the black struggle.[1] Today, the black church is often depicted as simultaneously being progressive in regard to racial justice concerns and being insular in relation to issues of gender equality.

Perhaps no societal problem has revealed the black church's complex character regarding social justice more than the HIV/AIDS crisis. Silence or condemnatory attitudes have characterized the black church's response to this crisis. Some researchers who have studied the black church have pointed out that such responses reflect the black community's general wariness to engage in a discussion of sexual issues and its animadversion toward homosexuality.[2] Others have wondered whether the black church's protracted response to HIV/AIDS signals its inability to deal with the difficult social issues affecting black America during the 21st century. If we bear in mind the black church's unfavorable reputation regarding women's issues as well as toward gay and lesbian concerns, we see that the HIV/AIDS debacle has led some people to further scrutinize the church's standing as a liberating agent for black women and men.[3] In regard to certain

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[1] For more on this, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster: 1988).

[2] See, for instance, Kelly Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

[3] See Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum 1995). Anderson has also raised this concern in various public lecture contexts.

social justice issues, the black church appears ambivalent, at best, and oppressively unprogressive, at worst.

How are we to explain the seemingly incongruous vacillations seen in the black church's responses to various social justice matters? Are those vacillations Faustian in nature? Thus, is the black church's position in regard to controversial "social" issues determined by the practical consequences of that position vis-à-vis white society? Or do those vacillations reflect something inherent to the character, function, or both of the black church itself? Is the black church really an antagonistic agent for liberating change, or is it simply a pacifying sanctuary for black life? How, indeed, are we to understand the significance of the black church in relation to black people's quest for life and wholeness and thus in relation to their challenging social justice struggles?

This article will attempt to answer those questions by examining the intricate value system of the black church and the implications of that system in regard to social justice responses. We will give special attention to homosexuality as a challenge to social justice.

What Is the Black Church?

The black church is a multitudinous community of churches, which are diversified by origin, denomination, doctrine, worshipping culture, spiritual expression, class, size, and other less-obvious factors. Yet, as disparate as black churches may seem, they share a special history, culture, and role in black life, all of which attest to their collective identity as the black church.

Black church history began during the antebellum period in America and was born during black "suffering of capture, Middle Passage, and enslavement."[4] It took shape as the enslaved Africans rejected their enslavers' version of Christianity, which asserted that God sanctioned slavery. The black church thus signified black people's resistance to an enslaving and dehumanizing white culture, even as it testified to God's affirmation of freedom and blackness.

The religious culture of the black church was shaped in large part by African traditional religions, Islam, African worldviews, and the Christian faith—as that faith was encountered in North America and as some enslaved Africans brought it with them from their homeland. This culture is

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[4] See Albert Raboteau, "The Blood of the Martyrs Is the Seed of Faith: Suffering in the Christianity of American Slaves," in *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption*, ed. Quinton Hosford Dixie and Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 23.

characterized by a special spirituality. W. E. B. Dubois called the spirituality infusing the black church a gift "which the Negro has injected into American life and civilization."[5] That spirituality honors, as Cheryl Townsend Gilkes observes, "personal experiences [with the Spirit] and fosters an ethic of comfort with diverse expressions of [persons'] interaction with the Spirit."[6]

The black church is also distinguished by the pervasive role that it plays in the lives of black people. Dubois poignantly captured the magnitude of the black church's responsibility with this timeless description:

> The Negro church of to-day is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.... Various organizations meet [in Negro church buildings]—the church proper, the Sunday-school, two or three insurance societies, women's societies, secret societies, and mass meetings of various kinds.... Considerable sums of money are collected and expended here, employment is found for the idle, strangers are introduced, news is disseminated, and charity distributed. At the same time this social, intellectual, and economic centre is a religious centre of great power.... Back of [its] more formal religion, the Church often stands as a real conserver of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on what is Good and Right.
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> Thus one can see in the Negro church to-day, reproduced in microcosm, all the great world from which the Negro is cut off by color-prejudice and social condition.[7]

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya affirm the timelessness of Dubois's description in their observation that while "social processes of migration, urbanization, and [class] differentiation have diminished aspects of [the black church's] centrality and dominance," the black church continues to greatly influence the social and religious life of the black community.[8] It is in appreciating the effect of the Black Church on black social and religious life that we come closer to understanding its rich

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[5] See W. E. B. Dubois, "Gift of the Spirit," which is excerpted in *W. E .B. Dubois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 54.

[6] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "'Some Folks Get Happy and Some Folks Don't': Diversity, Community, and African American Christian Spirituality" in *Dixie and West*, 203.

[7] W. E. B. Dubois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 153.

[8] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 17.

value system and, thus, its social justice responses. The first step in doing
so is to discern what it precisely means for the black church to be a social
and a religious center.

The Black Church as a Social Center

All churches are social institutions. They are structures or organiza-
tions that emerge from a community of people to foster that people's
interaction in society by fulfilling certain human needs—in this case
communal religious needs. The black church is, however, unique as a
social institution. As one of the few black institutions to survive slavery, it
is the one black social institution that remains virtually free from white
control. That observation is particularly true for the black independent
church tradition—that is, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African
Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), National and Progressive Baptist, and
so forth. Further, perhaps reflecting an African cultural heritage where
"secularity has little if any reality," the black church does not typically
differentiate between sacred and secular realms when meeting the needs of
its people.[9] There is no clear line of demarcation between religious or
church concerns and civil or social concerns. While in many white
churches civil and social concerns reflect a Samaritan impulse, for the
black church such concerns are integral to what it means to be church. The
black church is engaged in most spheres of black life.

    Given its wide realm of concern, the black church is not simply a social
institution. It is more fittingly, as Dubois suggests, the social center of black
life. It is in several ways, as observed by E. Franklin Frazier, a "nation
within a nation."[10]

    First, it is a place where black women and men gain affirmation, status,
and certain privileges—all of which are denied them in wider society be-
cause of their racial identity. For instance, the janitor in a white office
building can be the respected head of the deacon board at church. The
domestic worker can be the Sunday school superintendent. The black
church essentially creates its own independent hierarchies and networks of
power, which become avenues for people to garner ecclesiastical privilege

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[9] For the issue of sacred and secular reality in African religions, see Peter Paris, *The Spiri-
tuality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis, MN:
Fortress Press, 1995), 27.

[10] E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).
See especially chapter 3.

and, thus, to vicariously realize the social and political privileges denied them.

Second, as a nation within a nation, the black church provides the kind of social benefits that are de facto racially distributed within wider society. For instance, the church has historically rendered banking, legal, educational, health, and other services to its people. It has also established schools, banks, insurance companies, credit unions, health clinics, low-income housing, and so forth. The black church has further been a launch pad for black involvement in the wider social and political arena. Local and national black leaders often develop their leadership skills within the black church. It is not rare for a black minister to hold some type of civic or political office with the blessing and support of his or her congregation. There is characteristically frequent interplay between the black church and the social and political arena.

Finally, as a nation within a nation, the black church is a cauldron and preserver of black culture. Lincoln and Mamiya have asserted, "The black church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the black community."[11] Through the "preacher, the music, and the frenzy"[12] and other rituals of worship, the black church serves as the major reservoir of the black community's cultural heritage. Noting its crucial role in preserving black culture, Lincoln and Mamiya argue that "a demise of the black religious tradition would have profound implications for the preservation of culture."[13]

Lincoln and Mamiya also point out that "much of black culture is heavily indebted to the black religious tradition, including most forms of black music, drama, literature, storytelling, and even humor."[14] Just as the church has nurtured black leaders, it has done the same for black musicians, actors, and artists of other kinds. Many black artists recall that their first opportunity to display their talent was in the black church. The black church has also given birth to black cultural organizations, and it has been a vehicle for distributing cultural materials. The first black publisher, for instance, was the AME church.

As a social center, the black church is clearly a nation within a nation. It plays a multidimensional role in black life. It is a social, political, economic, and cultural refuge for a black people living in a white, racist society. It provides a bridge between the black community and the wider society. Because of the numerous ways in which the black church functions in black life, it

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[11] Lincoln and Mamiya.
[12] Dubois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 151.
[13] Lincoln and Mamiya, 10.
[14] Ibid., 8.

remains the preeminent black social institution and can, thus, be rightly regarded as a social center.

The Black Church as a Religious Center

The black church correspondingly plays an important role as a religious center. It provides fundamental religious teachings and advocates certain religious doctrines reflective of particular black churches. Most significantly, however, it establishes a definite system of values that are deemed crucial for black life. We have discerned two general types of values that characterize the black church: *core* and *contingent*.

Both core and contingent values emerge from experience. They are not derived from abstract universal or doctrinal notions of right and wrong. Rather, they arise from black people's experience as they have navigated life in a world hostile to their blackness. Those principles of thought and practice that become core or contingent values must meet at least three general criteria: (1) they help black women and men "make it" in a hostile social environment, (2) they resonate with black people's deepest aspirations for life and freedom, and (3) they are compatible with the workings of the Spirit in black lives.

Core values are the most enduring. They were initially negotiated as black people navigated the harsh terrain of slavery and recognized what was absolutely essential to the affirmation of black personhood.[15] Core values reflect a certain compatibility with the enslaved African's cultural heritage. Specifically, they correspond to an African worldview that equated balance and harmony with God. Black theologian Dwight Hopkins describes this worldview as one in which "All of life's dimensions involved a complementary and non-antagonistic relationship with that which was outside of oneself."[16] That which was considered divine—of God—was that which maintained a certain reciprocity and harmony.

Informed by this worldview, the enslaved Africans developed a definite core value system that suggested a harmony of relationships. The master–slave relationship was, therefore, impugned as evil. Such a noncomplementary relationship was not considered as being of God. The core values of the black church initially challenged any notion that God sanctioned slavery. As such, they signaled the nascent black church's protest against slaveholding versions of Christianity, even as they suggested an understanding of

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[15] For more on this notion of negotiation, see Gilkes.

[16] Dwight Hopkins, *Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 18.

Christianity that is perhaps more compatible with the Gospel. The black church's core values include love, inclusiveness, justice, freedom, equality. Those core values are raised to ultimate levels. They are sacrosanct. They provide the essence of the black faith tradition. The songs, prayers, and testimonies of the black church often bear witness to them. The enslaved people sang, for instance, this spiritual:

> Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver
> Daniel, deliver Daniel,
> Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
> An' why not every man.

Contingent values are theoretically more transient. They emerge in response to particular social and historical circumstances. They reflect what is deemed as important for the black community's well-being at any given time. While contingent values find legitimacy in the black faith tradition, they are not necessarily considered inviolable. They are often a source of discussion within the black church community. Not all black churches adhere to the same contingent values. Social factors such as class and educational backgrounds, along with denominational affiliations, often shape a particular congregation's contingent value system. Views on engagement with secular culture (i.e., nonchurch music, popular entertainment); proper attire for women; and the role of women in the ministry are examples of contingent values. Though those values are variable and transient, they are still difficult to change. A change in contingent values requires at least one of two things: (1) that the circumstances of black life drastically change or (2) that black people's perceptions of their situation and the best way to navigate that situation change.

Interestingly, core and contingent values can conflict. What the black church professes is not always compatible with what it promulgates. The core values reflect the black church's most profound beliefs. They reflect what the church stands for and what it believes about God—that is, that God is a loving and righteous God. Core values reveal the black church's professed theological identity.

Contingent values are more context dependent, and they reflect what black churches promulgate. While they ostensibly derive from the core values, they are most prominently determined by how certain life circumstances affect different communities of black women and men. Contingent values reflect the complex practical realities of living. They are the values considered best for surviving and even thriving as a community under difficult conditions. Thus, certain core and contingent values can appear to be at odds with one another. Indeed, this conflict between core and contingent

values contributes to the black church's ambivalent character, about which
we will say more later. For now, it is important to understand that both core
and contingent values are considered crucial to black welfare. While con-
tingent values might appear incongruous with certain core values, they, too,
are born out of black people's struggle in a world that habitually violates
their humanity.

As a religious center, the black church fosters both core and contingent
values. It provides a sacred canopy for those values regarded as beneficial
to black survival and freedom and wholeness. The black church thus bears
weighty responsibility within the black community. As a multitasked social
and religious center, it is a lifeline for the masses of black people. It un-
apologetically affirms the sanctity of black people's humanity in the midst
of a society that would transgress that humanity.

The Black Church's Ambivalent Character

Given the constancy of the black church in black lives, how are we to
understand its ebbs and flows? How do we account for the seemingly con-
tradictory manner in which it serves as a social and religious center, thus
sometimes appearing prophetic and liberating and other times appearing
stagnant and proscriptive? How is it that the black church can, at the same
time, fight for racial justice and oppose gay and lesbian rights. Essentially,
how are we to explain the persistent and pervasive presence of contingent
values that seem so incongruent with the black church's core value system
of love, inclusiveness, justice, freedom, and equality?

Many black church and religious scholars have suggested that this con-
tradictory nature reflects certain tensions intrinsic to the black church itself,
especially because those tensions mirror the basic character of black life.
Those scholars seem to be influenced by Dubois's poignant observation in-
volving black people's two warring souls.

Dubois observed that black Americans possess a double-consciousness.
This consciousness holds in tension who black people are as "Negroes"—that
is, their African soul—and who they are as Americans—that is, their Ameri-
can soul. Black religious scholars' descriptions of vacillations within the
black church suggest that black people's double-consciousness is played out
in the black church itself. The black church thus possesses, as Dubois noted,
two warring souls. Peter Paris points to this double-consciousness by describ-
ing the church as at once "compensatory" and "political."[17] Lincoln and

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[17] Paris.

Mamiya go even further by describing the black church as inherently dialec-
tical. They specifically delineate six characteristic polarities: priestly versus
prophetic, otherworldly versus this worldly, universal versus particular,
communal versus private, charismatic versus bureaucratic, and resistant
versus accommodating.[18] Notwithstanding the various tensions that have been
recognized within the black church, we suggest that the black church pos-
sesses a fundamentally dichotomous character, which produces any number
of tensions at any given time. That dichotomous character can be described
as dynamic and conserving.

Inasmuch as the black community has given birth to the black church
and because the church is the social and religious center of the black
community, it does sometimes mirror the double-consciousness of black
women and men. What is thus endemic to the black church is not a fixed set
of tensions or polarities, but its dynamic nature. The church mirrors the
ebbs and flows of the black community as that community navigates life in
a racially coded society.

Because the way black people are regarded and treated affects the black
community, the church is likewise affected. For instance, when the country
is more accommodating toward the black community, black men and
women tend to be more assimilating. In this regard, they are inclined to in-
tegrate into the mainstream. They are more accepting of "American" values.
When the country is more hostile toward the black community, black peo-
ple tend to be more separatist. They display more nationalistic tendencies
and are more nurturing of "Afro-centric" values. Note the proliferation of
race-conscious rap lyrics as the white backlash of the 1980's progressed.

Such integrationist and nationalist vacillations within the black commu-
nity influence how the black church functions and what it promulgates.
During a time of high integrationist fervor, the black church community is
unlikely to act in ways that would set itself apart from mainstream society.
It is more likely to move toward the center of social and public opinion and,
thus, to assert the kinds of values that would move it toward the center.
During times of racial antagonism, when the black community is more
likely to be nationalist in its thinking—that is, highlighting the ways in
which black people are different from the mainstream—the black church is
more disposed to be critical of society and more progressive in what it
promulgates.[19]

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[18] See Lincoln and Mamiya.
[19] It should be noted that some segments of the black church community are always disen-
   gaged from the wider political structure. In this regard, to engage or not to engage the
   world may be viewed as a contingent value.