

CHAPTER 1



A Theology of African American Worship

African American Christians gathered and engaged in worship, regardless of denomination, share many things in common. First and foremost, they gather to offer thanks and praise to God in and through Jesus the Christ, and to be spiritually fed by the Word of God! In response to God's call and by God's grace, communities of faith gather to affirm God's providence and power. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, African Americans express their corporate and personal belief that God in Jesus Christ continues to work for good in every aspect of their lives. There is an ethos of beloved community as the "extended family" recalls and celebrates freedom in Christ. Aware of the mysterious presence of the living Christ, the community is empowered to live the good news in the world.

Second, they share the reality of a common historical taproot, which extends deep into the nurturing center of the African soil. The community of faith can attest to the strength and sturdiness of this root by the nurturing it continues to provide Africans in diaspora. While the African heritage is not a monolithic entity, there are shared African primal world views that provide fundamental ways of knowing and experiencing God. For most African societies, humans live in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena, objects, and all of life are associated with acts of God.¹ Life is thus viewed holistically rather than in separate compartments as created by a secular-sacred dichotomy. These

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world views and other aspects of African cultures continued to exist as new world views and cultures were developing. Although languages, religions, customs, and institutions were diverse, many African societies shared certain virtues, ideals, cultural expressions, and outlooks on past, present, and future which provided spiritual armor capable of surviving the impact of slavery.

Some branches of the African heritage include direct involvement in the shaping of Judeo-Christian worship traditions. From the time Abraham came out of Ur and settled in Egypt, through the time when the church wrestled with the formulation of theological statements and the shaping of significant creeds, Africa has played a critical role. Nine Africans were among the prominent leaders in this struggle: Clement, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, Dionysius, Athanasius, Didymus, Augustine, and Cyril.

A third common particularity of African Americans gathered for worship is their history of struggle for survival as African people in America. In a strange and alien land, they were enslaved, marginalized, denied respect, and oppressed by the very people who introduced them to Christianity! This unique history allows the gathered Christian community to freely call itself by whatever name it chooses. African American, Black, and Afro-American have replaced the names spuriously given by Euro-American evangelizers. This history also served to deepen the need for communities of refuge, which happen naturally when people gather around a common cause. The gathered community, first in secrecy as "invisible communities of faith," found that the separate environments were conducive to authentic communication with God and with one another.

There was little if any concern during this early period for adherence to denominational polity, recitation of creeds, or "acceptable" employment of superimposed, predetermined liturgical action. There *was* concern for the exposition and hearing of biblical truths that had meaning for an enslaved people. Since the Word of God was heard in their particular context, responses were very often spontaneous reflections of the primal world views still very much alive. Symbols and ritual actions were gradually shaped around socially shared patterns, customs, and forms, with an apparent awareness of the human need to respond with one's whole being!

The "invisible" environment allowed free space, God's space, where enslaved worshippers could hear an anticipated message of hope in God's word. The personhood of each worshiper could be affirmed. The community could experience freedom—divine freedom—in Christ. Each time a member of the community of faith experienced freedom from bondage or a physical healing moment, the total community would vicariously experience a newfound freedom. Conversion experiences and baptisms were important times for the communal sharing of faith. The spiritual gifts and artistic talents of individuals that edified the community were acknowledged and encouraged in worship. In separate, sacred space, gifts and talents were not subjected to evaluation and scrutiny by Europeans and Americans. Worship gatherings, especially where elements of the oral tradition are at work, are opportunities for the community of faith to continually reconstitute and reinforce the spiritual bond within and between congregations.

Under the power of the Holy Spirit, a new theology was forged and flamed while the church worshiped. The methodology used was honed from "folk methods" common to Africans and transported wherever Africans are in diaspora. Music, song, and storytelling by the *griot* (a West African term for "one who is gifted in the art of communicating wisdom, ideas, historical events, morals, etc.") became the major means of shaping, documenting, and distributing folk theology. This common heritage continues to be a channel through which the Spirit of God edifies and empowers the body of Christ. Gathered and scattered as African American Christians in the present age, believers are provided sustenance by this rich heritage that propels believers, with hope, into the future.

From the African taproot, the early shapers of Black folk religion forged a Christian world view, or "sacred cosmos," that permeates all of life.² Everyday living is not separate from worship. The reality of human corruption, oppression, and inequality anywhere in the world provides a hermeneutical principle, a lens through which the Word of God is seen, heard, understood, felt, and interpreted in worship.

Although African Americans share many common worship practices, one should not assume that *all* African American congregations will or should exhibit homogeneous styles of worship. Different situations and circumstances under which expo-

sure to Christianity took place for each congregation, denomination (history and theological orientation), geography, and social life-styles are significant determinants of worship.

The traditional manner of "labeling" denominational differences among African American worshippers has not always been accurate, nor has it been helpful. The stereotyping of ritual action has not always taken into consideration the sociological factors of cross ritual assimilation *between* denominations, especially in small communities in the South. There are also differences in ritual action *within* denominations. To assume, for instance, that all African American Presbyterians should be numbered among the "frozen-chosen" is to ignore the dynamics of "Spirit-filled" churches such as those in rural sections of North and South Carolina and Georgia. To claim that *all* African American Baptist worship services are highly emotional is to negate the "modulated" liturgical experiences and expressions of *some* African American Baptists in both urban and rural settings. The trend from the late sixties forward among some African American congregations traditionally labeled "frozen," "staid," or "unemotional" has been toward a more expressive worship.³ Some African American Catholic, Episcopalian, United Methodist, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, and Presbyterian worshippers are rediscovering and reclaiming their common Afrocentric theological roots. More will be said about this in a later chapter.

Core Beliefs

The common elements of history and traditions provide a starting point for a discourse on African American liturgical theology. While different denominational polities may indeed affect the ordering of worship elements, many liturgical practices originated from basic beliefs of African peoples. Some of the ritual action that may appear to be an adherence to the institutional practices of Western-oriented theologies may, in fact, be based on certain African practices that have been transmitted through the oral tradition. This is one indication that many core beliefs remain operative across denominational lines.

We are indebted to the oral and written records of African Americans who attempted to interpret the meaning of the Christian faith amid the struggles for liberation in America. The faith stories of individuals and communities are the major sources of African American theology. We are equally indebted to the rigorous efforts of African American scholars who continue to research and publish significant data needed to theologize from *within* the African American experience.

The concept of "Black Theology," which emerged during the second half of the 1960s, stimulated sufficient African/African American ecumenical dialogue to affirm common threads of history and theology.⁴ Since the 1960s, African American scholars in a variety of academic disciplines have continued to contribute to the discussion evolving from the question What does it mean to be African American and Christian? Documentation gathered from personal trips to Africa and from African scholars supports the thesis that the African taproot is not only deep but is also very much alive and being nurtured by African Americans in worship and life. Theological reflections and publications in a variety of academic disciplines in African American seminaries provide opportunities for reflection-praxis continuity between lived realities and "the academy."⁵

A holistic approach is required for examining worship from within the African American experience. African peoples perceive reality as one related whole rather than as separate compartments. There is no separation of secular and sacred. The "rhythm of life" is bound up in the cosmos—a harmonious world, created and ordered by Almighty God. People of African descent were thinking holistically long before Teilhard de Chardin constructed a Christian cosmogony as a synthesis of love for God bound to love for the world.⁶ While postmodernist schools of thought are now returning to the interrelatedness of disciplines in theologizing, folk beliefs that issue from the "soul of Black folks" have continuously reflected this method of theologizing.⁷

African "primordial," or primal, world views that shaped foundational belief systems also undergird African American theologies of worship. World views determine and affect cultural symbols and symbolisms through which beliefs are expressed and transmitted. Prevailing African cosmological views can be summarized as follows:

- God created an orderly world, and remains present and is dynamically involved in ongoing creation throughout the inhabited world.
- Human beings are part of God's creation and are, therefore, divinely linked, related to, and involved with all of creation. This cosmological perspective allows an understanding of being (ontology) which is relational and communal.
- An understanding of the "sacred cosmos" that is relevant for the individual must be internalized if one is to find meaning and purpose in life.
- Communal solidarity is expressed in terms of kinship and extended family, both vertically and horizontally.
- Bound by an understanding of the sacredness of God's creation, humans relate holistically to God, to each other, to the cosmos, and to plant and animal life.
- Cosmic rhythm is the embodiment of divine order, harmony, and permanence; cosmic rhythm is the foundation for the "rhythm of life."

While there are some differences in understandings of the presence and activity of God, creation is undoubtedly the work of God.⁸ The cosmos, God's divine creation, is understood as a whole unit or body that is alive, sacred, and the foundation of religious values. Modalities of the sacred and of being are revealed through the natural world and cosmic rhythms. The harmonious structure of the cosmos is a means by which God's transcendence is remembered. "Divine connectedness" is activated through symbols and symbolism. Water, for instance, symbolizes the origin and sustenance of life as well as death and rebirth. Contact with water signifies a return or reincorporation into creation or pre-creation.⁹

African peoples respond to God's presence in a variety of ways. Responses may be formal or informal, spontaneous or regularized, personal or communal. Worship is generally expressed vocally and physically rather than meditatively.¹⁰ Beliefs as well as ritual actions are related to the lived experiences of the community. Worship is more experiential than rationalistic. Its focus is on the communal sharing of reality rather than simply the transmission of information. Since the focus is primarily experiential, common symbols, shaped by

the community, are the major means of communication. Through symbols the community expresses what might be difficult to verbalize. Symbols help "free" the mind of clutter so that clarity can be given to phenomena that might otherwise be incomprehensible. Music, movement, physical gestures, colors, shapes, and the gifts of nature common to the community are very important symbols.

A composite of basic beliefs based on primordial, or "primal," world views has emerged as African Americans make deliberate efforts to theologize from within the African American experience. "Primal" is understood as fundamental or "a priori" rather than the usual concept of "primitive" or undeveloped. Primal beliefs refer to those forms of comprehensive reference-systems that are observable among a variety of religions, and may have been basic to the overall religious history of humankind. All cultures have convictions of reality that are based on traditional ways that the particular world is viewed in the light of circumstances. Thus it is the contention of African American liturgical theology that African primal world views, which lie buried within persons and communities of faith, co-exist with and remain operable in Christian theology. In fact, for the African American, the adapting of Christian beliefs necessitated a recasting of concepts taught to an enslaved people, in understandable, functional terms.

Cooper-Lewter and Mitchell are helpful in their exploration of the African American belief systems through case studies of "core beliefs" in action. They contend:

Core beliefs are much more than easily mouthed shibboleths or conformist creeds. They are bedrock attitudes that govern all deliberate behavior and relationships and also spontaneous responses to crises . . . if indeed . . . expressed at all, core beliefs are our working out opinions about whether God can be trusted. . . . The issue is not the correctness of formulation but the adequacy of trust of the Creator.¹¹

A persistent negative attitude toward African primal religions has made it difficult to acknowledge the inheritance of primal world views and core beliefs. Nevertheless, there are sufficient data to substantiate the "primal" acceptance of the

unity and wholeness of life, which is evident in African American communal life, religion and worship, music, art, politics, and culture. The outward expressions of feelings and emotions, the tendency to "move with the beat," the similarity of music for worship and music for entertainment all speak to the functioning of an underlying belief system. A system of beliefs imposed by the dominant culture could not and cannot be a viable belief system for a marginalized people. A belief system, already well established in African traditions, continues to help an oppressed community find meaning and make sense of life, maintain community identity and continuity, find direction, and provide healing and empowerment.¹²

Unlike the Western-oriented Christian, whose theology is rooted in Greco-Roman concepts and culture, African peoples tend to seek to *know* God personally rather than to *know about* God from doctrines and creeds. Traditional Africans, whose entire existence is a religious phenomenon, would become immersed early in the idea that God "is," not because they had been told about God's existence, but because God can be experienced in all of creation. This is summarized in the Ashanti proverb: "No one shows a child the Supreme Being," which means in essence that everybody, including children, knows God almost as if by instinct.¹³ Christian faith, for traditional Africans, does not mean that one has to assent to or recite certain written doctrines or creeds to prove that one knows about God. What matters is that one seeks to know God through God's revelational activity in one's own life and in the life of the community.

African peoples in America expressed in a number of ways the importance of experiencing and knowing God in Jesus Christ. Personal revelations were so important for some slaves that the reading of the Bible was often deferred until after their conversions. The language of some of the slave songs reveals the biblical message taught in relation to their own experiences. "I heard from heaven today"; "Jesus goin' make up my dying bed"; and "God don't never change" are a few of the many examples. Worship and praise services were especially important to the slaves, for it was here that the encounter between God and humans became real for them. In gospel songs, African Americans continue to document the importance of knowing God. The language of these songs reflects a reaching out through space and

time as singers identify with the lived experiences of others, so that the characters, scenes, and events of the Bible become present and provide evidence of hope.

The story is told of a slave who was unable to read and, therefore, relied on others to share the biblical stories. When approached about the depth of her understanding of the gospel message, she replied: "I can't read a word. But I read Jesus in my heart. . . . I knows he's there 'cause I read him in my heart, just like you know about him from reading the book!"

Knowing happens deep within the "soul-roots" of perception as a result of experience. Knowing provides clarity and certainty, which may not lend itself to systematic discourse or to the formulation of hammered-out creeds that might be challenged by Western theology. African American preachers express what the Word of God calls them to *know*, and further authenticate this by recalling the exact experience of the "knowing moment." Hearers participate in and claim the reality of another's "experienced knowledge" as they seek to know for themselves.

Kinship

One of the strongest forces in traditional African life that continues among African Americans is a deep sense of kinship or relatedness. From the perspective of primal world views, God is the continuing source and sustenance of all that is good. Since God called forth the cosmos as an orderly, complete, and perfect entity, all creation and the inhabited universe are sacred to God. Humanity is part of the created order, thus human beings are to exist in unity with one another and with all of creation. To be human means that one belongs to a family or community. The Akan in West Africa express this idea in this manner: Onipe fi soro besi a, obesi nnipa krom, which is freely translated "When a person descends from heaven, he or she enters a town inhabited by human beings." The implication is that society is the context of human existence. One's humanity is defined by a sense of belonging, for it is not enough to be a human being unless one participates in and demonstrates a sense of community. Religion, understood as one with life, is not an isolated part of the community's life, but permeates every facet of the community's existence.

Nearly all concepts connected with the interrelatedness of God's total creation can be understood and interpreted through a hermeneutic of "the kinship system." The sense of kinship is not limited to human relations. It involves all that binds humans to one another and extends to include all of nature—both animal and plant life. Kinship is the basis for an understanding of the community as both the living, the "living-dead" (the deceased who are alive in the memories of the surviving family), and those yet unborn "who are still in the loins of the living."¹⁴ The anticipated arrival of future generations yet unborn provides hope in the continuation of God's ongoing family. A visible symbol of unity, of extended family, of belongingness, togetherness, and common affinity is made possible, according to John S. Mbiti, through the kinship system.

The kinship system is like a vast network stretching laterally (horizontally) in every direction, to embrace everybody in any given local group. This means that each individual is a brother or sister, father or mother, grandmother or grandfather . . . to everybody else. That means that everybody is related to everybody else . . . it also extends vertically to include the departed . . . and those yet to be born.¹⁵

This understanding of community created by the kinship system is a reminder that individuals exist as a part of the corporate whole. One becomes aware of self, duties, privileges, and responsibilities in terms of others. A cardinal point in the understanding of this African view of community is the adage: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."¹⁶

It is conceivable that the African concept of kinship provides a foundation for relatedness in the household or family of God in Jesus Christ. In spite of separation and transition through slavery, this concept continued. New relationships were developed where two or three were gathered in worship or at work. The African community-kinship emerged wherever relationships, based on mutual interdependence, trust, and suffering, took place. African American worship continues as an arena where a people, already related by the Providence of God, can hear the healing Word of God and respond.

The unique forms of liturgy in African American worship are the results of what Victor Turner refers to as "anti-structures."¹⁷ Turner contends that anti-structure, as generated through the ritual process, is marginal, but part of the "serious life." Worship as ritual provides an opportunity to create new symbols, which produce structures and anti-structures. Turner argues that

marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide [us] with a set of . . . models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and [our] relationship to society, nature and culture, but they are more than classifications, since they incite [us] to action as well as thought.¹⁸

In the context of a loving community, the ritual action of worship allows the worshiper to transcend social structures imposed by the dominant culture, thus generating anti-structures. Under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, freedom is granted and new meaning is given to life. One's dignity and worth are affirmed, a positive self-image can be developed and maintained, and healing can take place. Worshipers hear the Word of God in Jesus Christ as it speaks directly to the realities of their lives and empowers them to live as whole persons in the world.

The worship of African American Christians is informed by at least four streams of tradition: traditional African primal world views; Judeo-Christian religion; African American folk religion, which emanated from world views shaped in the American context in a crisis of slavery and oppression; and Western/Euro-American Christianity. African American *leitourgia* (liturgy)—the work of the people as ritual action, ministry, and service—is reflective of the experiences of a particular people deeply aware of the power and the promise of God.

For Discussion

1. Identify four prevailing African world views that undergird a theology of African American worship.

2. What are some problems (dangers) in stereotyping people according to particular styles of worship?
3. How is the African/African American concept of kinship and extended family related to the human family of God?
4. What are the four streams of traditions that inform and shape the content and norms of African American worship?

CHAPTER 2



The African Religious Heritage

The majority of Africans who would ultimately shape African American worship came from a 3,000-mile stretch along the west coast of Africa from the Senegal River to the southern limits of Angola. The form and extent of slave trade on the African continent prior to the massive importation of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean indicates the possibility that a small percentage of Africans imported to America might have come from countries other than those along the west coast. Mozambique, the island of Madagascar, East Africa, and southern Sudan were centers of world trade, and it is likely that persons from these areas could have been relocated on the west coast of Africa.¹

Forms of Communications

Peoples of Africa created a myriad of languages, religions, customs, and political systems, all of which differentiated societies. While there is no common language—"lingua African"—there are shared fundamental world views that provide a basic system for perceiving and responding to reality which enables African people to make sense out of life situations in order to survive. The family unit and kinship system around which much of life flowed facilitated the establishing of religious belief systems and practices that were integral to life. The deeply engrained urge for expres-