

Black Public Theology In America: A General Survey

By

Larry Donell Covin, Jr.

{From the Archives of Dr. Covin's Unpublished Papers}

August 14, 2023

"Defend the Weak and the Fatherless, Uphold the Cause of the Poor and the Oppressed"
Psalm 82:3

The constructing of an African American Religious Pedagogy, or Black Theology, thereby creating a Black Public Theology in America, serves as a repository, of not only the Black and African American experience in America; however, as a lived historical account of the American experience from its inception.

Black Public Theology is a window into the struggles, as well as the triumphs of the African American experience in these United States and prior. It is at once a response to the attitudes, public perceptions, and the codification of policies and laws designed to marginalize persons of color. This in juxtaposition with religious experiences emerging from differences of theological interpretation, dogma or church polity.

While not diminishing the importance of the monoprocessionism and filioqusim schism, a question of the origins of the Holy Spirit, and the impetus for one of the great church splits in church history; this theologian has posited often, that Black Public Theology is concerned with mitigating existential threats to an entire people, and not simply abstract dialectical theological concerns.

Howard Thurman the Theologian, Philosopher and Mystic extraordinaire, captures the nature of the existential threats to African Americans, and their existence since their inception in the

Americas. Writing in *Jesus And The Disinherited*, Thurman articulates the adaptation of Africans in the diaspora-African Americans, in their quest for survival. It is a type of, what is referred to in theology, as *creatio ex nihilo* or God's creation from *nihilum* or literally nothing. African Americans have survived informed by a cultural and unique *creatio ex nihilo*, as evidenced by their ability to survive genocidal conditions. "The underprivileged may decide to juggle the various areas of compromise, on the assumption that the moral quality of compromise operates in an ascending-descending scale. According to this argument, not all issues are equal in significance or in consequence."¹

Theology, as with scholarship in general, is imagined and informed within a context. At the time of this writing, actors representative of government, public education, and in the public square have engaged in *Historical Negationism*, as referenced by Henry Rousso, to distort and disfigure and create a pornographic narrative, of the African American experience, as well as their response to white supremacy.

This revisionist historical, reimagined response, mitigates the inhumane and diabolical reality, of African American existence in the colonies and the United States thereafter. The response of African Americans has been one of survival, irrespective of how observers have applied their misinformed hermeneutic. Howard Thurman amplifies this reality. "All over the world there are millions of people who are condemned by the powerful in their society to live in ghettos. The choice seems to be the ghetto or suicide...there are great numbers of people who have decided to live, and to compromise on the matter of place and conditions."²

¹ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 66.

² Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 67.

The Public Theology experience within the Black, the African American experience, burgeons from and is in response to, the varied existential threats emerging throughout historically significant inflection points in this country. Black Public Theology is present in the struggle for emancipation and abolition in the ministry of The Reverend Theodore Sedgwick Wright, and in the unrelenting salvos of The Reverend Henry McNeal Turner. Black Public Theology is present in the theology and protest of Delores S. Williams, Katie Cannon and Jacquelyn Grant, as each developed a *Womanist Theology* to negate misogynist theology and practices; a reprise of Karl Barth's resounding NO to Emil Brunner, as women of color addressed inequities that marginalized African American women.

The work of which, had it come earlier in history, would have made heroines such as Diane Nash as familiar in history as that of her male contemporaries. Nash is credited with co-founding the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and often cited as a significant strategist in the desegregation of lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1960, when at that time a student at nearby Fisk University.

The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University chronicles the contribution of Diane Nash. "Through her involvement with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Diane Nash worked closely with Martin Luther King. In 1962 King nominated Nash for a civil rights award sponsored by the New York branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People...King described Nash as the driving spirit in the nonviolent assault on segregation at lunch counters."³

³ MLK Research and Education Institute, "Nash, Diane Judith," para.1.

From Theodore Sedgwick Wright to Katie Cannon, Black Public Theology is identifiable in the public discourse.

Public Theology in general, and Black Public Theology in particular, is characterized by its need to be grounded in the pedagogy of protest, as well as a methodology that extrapolates from sound theological reflection and scholarly rigor. Protest and scholarship at its best will be coterminous. Protest lacking methodology is ephemeral and lacks pedagogical systematic repurposing. Scholarship that is and remains untethered to the realities of life in community is aloof.

Whether justified or unjustified, one of the critiques James Cone made of his predecessor at Union Theological Seminary, Reinhold Niebuhr, was that Niebuhr like many Protestant Theologians outside of the African American experience, was less concerned with black suffering and those marginalized in the United States. Writing in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone made the following observation. "Niebuhr had 'eyes to see' black suffering, but I believe he lacked the 'heart to feel' it as his own...the problem of race was never one of his central theological or political concerns."⁴

It can be posited that many of James Cone's concerns reflective of the academy and Black Public Theology, are resonant in our contemporary discourse on Black Public Intellectualism, both in the academy and the public square. Cone found it disconcerting that there seemed to be an insurmountable divide between the academy and Public Theology. Worse, it often appears to be the case, that Black Public Intellectuals have allowed themselves to be ghettoized, into four or five public figures, often embedded in four or five universities, chosen by White America to speak

⁴ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 41.

on the behalf of the African American experience. This is problematic, in that there are never four or five White Public Intellectuals identified, as representative of the whole of White America. This is a less salient, yet insidious form of racism.

James Cone's commentary on Reinhold Niebuhr's lack of representation in the public square, is a subject of debate in *Black Society* that needs to be revisited. Cone makes the following observation. "There was, however, an important difference between Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr., that partly accounts for why King became a martyr in the civil rights movement while Niebuhr remained safely confined in his office at Union Seminary."⁵

What lessons can Black Public Theology learn from a Marxist Philosopher from Italy? Antonio Francesco Gramsci was born in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and introduced the concept of *Organic Intellectuals*; intellectuals who are invested in the communities and spaces in which they participate in, and provide commentary on. At the time of this writing, Miguel A. De La Torre, who serves as Professor of Social Ethics and Latinx Studies at Iliff School of Theology, reinterprets the role of the Public Theologian through the prism of Gramsci's concept of Organic Intellectual. De La Torre makes the following claim. "...Ministers and scholars attempt to learn from the disenfranchised while serving them as organic intellectuals (to borrow a term from Antonio Gramsci), that is, intellectuals grounded in the social reality of the marginalized, and acting in the consciousness-raising process of the faith community."⁶

Historically, African Americans have been better positioned to interpret the socioeconomic realities of life in the United States, and the implications thereof for persons of color, due to their

⁵ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 71.

⁶ De La Torre, *Christian Ethics from the Margins*, xii.

devalued status. Dietrich Bonhoeffer posits that it is this devaluation of personality, that lends itself to greater clarity of the phenomenon Friedrich Schleiermacher refers to as *God-consciousness*. Writing while confined in a German Nazi prison cell, in *The View from Below*, Bonhoeffer elucidates this move. "It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts...in short from the perspective of the suffering...that we have come to see...clearer, freer, more incorruptible..."⁷ Bonhoeffer through his suffering becomes an Organic Intellectual.

Black Public Theology speaks inconvenient truths. The theology of Public Theology calls upon the prophetic voice to declare that *The Emperor has no clothes*. This speaking truth to power was on full display during the era of the Vietnam War. Martin Luther King, Jr., epitomized the function of the Organic Intellectual. Writing in *Thirteen Turns: A Theology Resurrected from the Gallows of Jim Crow Christianity*, this author captures the prophetic voice of Dr. King.

The sanitized depiction of the war across television screens was disrupted by King's portrayal of the war. 'So far we may have killed a million of them-mostly children. They wander...homeless, without clothes, running in packs on the streets like animals...degraded by our soldiers as they beg for food...selling their sisters to our soldiers, soliciting for their mothers.' [Then as now] confronted with the realities of the Vietnam War, Grenada Invasion, Operation Desert Shield, Second Persian Gulf War, Abu Ghraib Prisoner Torture, America disassociates its role in the global hostilities displayed against it. And yet, in a type of spiritual and religious dissonance, Americans did and do now, weep at the playing of the National Anthem during entertainment sporting events, conflate Christianity with nationalism, and tout our brand of theocratic Americana around the world. As we call ourselves a Christian nation, yet we display violence around the world. King stated, 'I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today-my own government'.⁸

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, 775.

⁸ Covin, *Thirteen Turns*, 21.

Black Public Theology, historically has articulated a theology of liberation for the oppressed and the despised. In the United States there has existed a systemic and codified disdain for African Americans. The very fabric of American life, through both culture and institutions, has been a sustained and intentional dehumanizing of black people. Whether through the institution of slavery or Jim Crow, the disenfranchisement of generations of African Americans through the legal system, the systematic incarceration of persons of color-most notably African American males, underrepresentation in higher education through discriminatory policies, or the criminalization of drug addiction in black communities, as compared to treatment in white communities; it is in no way hyperbolic to suggest that ethnocide has been the telos of all collective efforts. This is the negation of justice.

Nicholas Wolterstorff asserts that justice is grounded in the theology of Old Testament scripture. There cannot be an authentic claim to Christianity without the embracing of justice. Oppression is antithetical to and the negation of the Imago Dei. Writing in *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*, Wolterstorff posits the following concerning justice. “The Old Testament declarations about justice is the passionate insistence that all members of the community are entitled to a full and secure place in the life of the community. Hence the clanging repetitive reference to orphans, widows and sojourner.”⁹

Black Public Theology is concerned with the intersectionality of theology, justice, and so-called race in past and present American culture.

The appropriation of Christianity, and at times the church in the United States, has witnessed the weaponization of religion to articulate and perpetuate a narrative of white superiority, and

⁹ Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom*, 143.

hegemony over African Americans. The tension which marked the theological and theoretical divergence of the German Evangelical Church and the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, is similar in the minds of many African Americans, to the tension between a white theology which justified and sanctioned lynching of black people in the United States, and a theology of liberation that affirmed the humanity of African Americans.

Black Public Theology is grounded in a theology of humanity which celebrates all people. It does not create a pornographic theology of apartheid. It does not appropriate religion and the church to achieve a narrative of race superiority. Black Public Theology is grounded in the theology of covenant and community of all people and cultures. This is the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher's reconciliation and regeneration. Schleiermacher writing in *The Christian Faith* makes the following claim. "All that comes to exist in the world through redemption is embraced in the fellowship of believers, within which all regenerate people are always found."¹⁰

Schleiermacher emphasizes that Christianity is covenant community. A covenant community that transcends racial and cultural claims of superiority. Black Public Theology is informed by a theology, methodology and pedagogy of justice in Schleiermacher, who articulates a fellowship of believers. "That wherever regenerate persons are within reach of each other, some kind of fellowship between them is bound to arise. For if they are in contact, their witness to the faith must in part overlap, and must necessarily involve mutual recognition and a common understanding as to their operating within the common area."¹¹

¹⁰ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 525.

¹¹ Hodgkin and King, *Readings in Christian Theology*, 248.

Black Public Theology grounded in Schleiermacher, is the negation of Jim Crow, white nationalism, and apartheid in the United States and abroad.

Black Public Theology, as a moral imperative, seeks to elucidate the obfuscated roots of racism often imbedded in institutions, laws and legislation. The opaque nature of policies which trample the rights of persons of color are often hidden in seemingly benign language, however, upon greater scrutiny the insidious nature of these laws are laid bare. Such an example is the Affirmative Action debate around college admissions. This, despite the fact that African Americans are woefully underrepresented in higher education. Education has always been a strategic hill, that the majority body politic has understood to be sacred ground; to be safeguarded by any means necessary.

As such, Black Public Theology has historically invested its human resources of talent and financial capital, in the sphere of higher education for and of its people. “The black pulpit, historically has been the locus of black resistance and prophetic voice in America speaking from the margins. For nearly a century, the black Preacher integrated religion, politics, and the academy in *Speaking Truth to Power*. This period marks the magnum opus of black religious prophetic voice emanating from the black church.”¹²

A significant distinction in the demarcation of Public Theology in general, and Black Public Theology in particular, is the ease with which black culture integrated the pulpit, the public square, as well as the academy.

The black preacher, black theologian, and black academic synthesized into one discipline what the white church understood as a binary; the pulpit was the domain of the preacher, the academy was the domain of the scholar, and the body politic was given expression through the work of the politician. In black America, no such luxury

¹² Covin, *Thirteen Turns*, 41.

existed for black people. Perhaps this is a reality inherited by black people from African traditional religion, which understands no arbitrary lines of demarcation, separating religious experience from the all-encompassing lived experience. ...Despite the binary created by the color issue in America, [The Reverend] Mordecai Johnson set out to transform black America. Johnson came to the presidency of Howard University in the year 1926, during the time in which one of his most accomplished faculty, and there were many, Alain LeRoy Locke, coined the phrase New Negro. Henry Louis Gates, writing in an article titled "The New Negro and the Black Image: From Booker T. Washington to Alain Locke," makes the following observation. "The New Negro...have risen since the war, with education, refinement, and money. In marked contrast with their enslaved or disenfranchised ancestors, these New Negroes demanded that their rights as citizens be vouchsafed by law. Significantly, these New Negroes were to be recognized by their education..." Mordecai Johnson, the institution's inaugural black president, laid the foundation for its unofficial name of the black mecca and the so-called New Negro. Johnson would lead Howard University for thirty-four years. During his tenure some of the greatest intellectuals served as faculty members, and Howard University became a significant influence pertinent to shaping black culture and intellectual life.¹³

The legacy of The Reverend Mordecai Johnson is a significant chapter in the narrative of Black Public Theology in higher education. An often overlooked contribution of Black Public Theology. The Reverend Benjamin Elijah Mays, would serve as the sixth president of Morehouse College from 1940 until 1967, further making an indelible contribution of Black Public Theology in higher education. The relationship between Black Public Theology and higher education is indisputable.

In more recent times, the late Rev. Dr. Calvin O. Butts III would continue in this tradition of Black Public Theology in higher education, serving as the Senior Pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, while also serving as the President of the State University of New York at Old Westbury.

The Black Church, and the Black Public Theologian have often been criticized, at times deservingly so; however, there are times when the critique of Black Religion and the Black Public Theologian is misplaced, due to a lack of appreciation of their many contributions. One glaring

¹³ Covin, *Thirteen Turns*, 42-47.

example is that of The Right Reverend-Bishop Charles Blake, Sr., and his many public housing, economic, and business initiatives in Los Angeles over many years. Bishop Blake has been a tireless advocate for the continent of Africa as well. This Black Public Theologian's work has been recognized by former United States President Barack Obama, as well as basketball legend and businessman Earvin Magic Johnson, for his transformative work in the community of Los Angeles. This is the Organic Intellectual par excellence.

"In response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa, Bishop Blake founded, and was president of the Pan African Children's Fund (PACF). Save Africa's Children, a program of PACF, provided support to over 420 orphan care programs, 200,000 children and 24 nations throughout sub-Saharan Africa. ...In 2003, Bishop Blake was awarded the Harvard Foundation Humanitarian Medal for his work with Save Africa's Children and its mission to support orphanages throughout the continent of Africa."¹⁴

The late Reverend Leon H. Sullivan, the longtime pastor of Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, served on the Board of Directors of General Motors, at a time when African Americans were not represented in Corporate America boardrooms, and founded the OIC or Opportunities Industrialization Center. Here again, Black Public Theology is at the forefront of Black economic empowerment in the United States, and dismantling systemic public sin in the form of social and economic policies.

Could it be that one of, if not the most important-second only to The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Public Theologians of the twentieth century has been relegated to the annals of anonymity? Arguably, due in part to his placement in history, The Reverend Adam Clayton Powell,

¹⁴ Howard University, "Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel," paras. 3, 5.

Jr., could be the most strategically placed Black Public Theology figure of the twentieth century. Powell, was the longtime and beloved pastor of The Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, from 1937 until 1972, and a member of the United States House of Representatives from 1945 until 1971. After serving for fifteen years in the Congress, The Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., would rise to become the Chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor.

As a United States Congressman, Rev. Powell would introduce what came to be known as *The Powell Amendment*. These amendments much to the chagrin of the political establishment, were added as safeguards and prohibitions against legislation that threatened to marginalize black life, in particular in public education. “The brainstorm of New York Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, this amendment would withhold federal funds from any school district that refused to obey the Supreme Court decision prohibiting segregation in public schools.”¹⁵

Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., would become one of the most influential figures in the United States, black or white. Charles V. Hamilton, the W.S. Sayer Professor Emeritus at Columbia University, writing in *The Political Biography of an American Dilemma: Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.*, described Rev. Powell’s chairmanship. “But as chairman of a major congressional committee, Powell had achieved unquestionably the strongest position a black person had ever attained in the United States government. ...He had institutional power as the chairman of an important congressional committee. This was not only civil rights leadership; this was political leadership in the fullest sense.”¹⁶

¹⁵ The Harvard Crimson, “*The Powell Amendment*,” para. 2.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell*, 30-31.

The Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., deserves a special place in the collective memory of not only Black Public Theology and Black History; however, in the development of American political history in the twentieth century. Rev. Powell laid the groundwork for African American leadership in the ensuing years, and the overall quality of life for African Americans and the dismantling of institutional sin.

Reinhold Niebuhr, Cone's critique notwithstanding, is helpful in providing language to understand the varied facets of sin and how sin manifests. Writing in *Thirteen Turns*, this scholar captures Niebuhr's diagnosis of the moral dimension of sin.

*'But sin also has a moral dimension. The ego which falsely makes itself the center of existence in its pride and will-to-power inevitably subordinates others life to its will. If perfect love is the sacrifice of self, sin is the assertion of self against others...' It is this moral dimension which informs white supremacy and other forms of discrimination, to include policies and laws which value some lives more than others, vis-à-vis [Former] President Donald Trump's alleged reference to African countries as "shit-hole" countries, as well as immigration policies that treat immigrants with less than justice and rights. '...Sin is always trying to be strong at the expense of someone else. The moral dimension of sin, therefore, is injustice—an unwillingness to value the claims of the other or to see one's own claims as equal but not superior to the other's.' This moral dimension has tangible qualities and influence in the existential and ontological being of its subjects; it deprives people of personality and beingness. 'The root of injustice is exploitation, enslaving, or taking advantage of other life.'*¹⁷

Black Public Theology must possess the intellectual dexterity and cultural acuity, to immerse itself in a substantive and consequential manner in the most significant occurrences of the times. Failure to possess the intuitiveness of informed responses, renders Black Public Theology as theatrical. Due in part to the erosion of religious influence in the postmodern era, as well as the erosion of theological erudition within Black Public Theology, the Black Protestant Church is often excluded from the discussion of the most serious issues informing society. Instead, intellectuals

¹⁷ Covin, *Thirteen Turns*, 26.

within the academy are called upon, to give commentary on social concerns shaping the black community and narrative. The seat of black intellectualism should reside in both the academy and with Black Public Theology intellectuals. This is the move, the inflection point, the paradigm shift that should inform Black Public Theology in the twenty-first century.

The intellectual dexterity and cultural acuity of which Black Public Theology must embrace, by necessity finds solidarity with and in, movements and causes that have both shared common interests, and the imposition of existential threats to their existence. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man* author, emphasized the interconnectedness of humanity. Heschel understood the requisite nature of this interrelatedness.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was a Jewish theologian and philosopher with a social consciousness that led him to participate in the civil rights movement. Considered "one of the truly great men" of his day and a "great prophet" by Martin Luther King, Jr., Heschel articulated to many Jewish Americans and African Americans the notion that they had a responsibility for each other's liberation and for the plight of all suffering fellow humans around the world.¹⁸

The embracing of human rights activists such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, who brought national attention to the exploitation of poor farm workers in the nineteen sixties, is a continuation of Rabbi Heschel's thinking concerning solidarity, which must inform Black Public Theology collaborations. Exploitation of labor and earnings, as well as the desecration of the sacredness of the family unit, through gender exploitation and generational illiteracy and disenfranchisement, all of which were evils Chavez and Huerta confronted, are shared experiences of persons of color in the United States and around the world, thus creating an organic solidarity.

¹⁸ "Heschel, Abraham Joshua," para. 1.

Whether poor farm workers in California during the nineteen sixties, or marginalized African Americans in present day Mississippi, or the Tohono O’odham Nation tribes in Arizona, poverty and exploitation serve as the impetus for the clarion call Black Public Theology must sound.

The Delano Grape Strike which began in September of 1965, was greatly impacted through the involvement of both Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta; who together had earlier in 1962 founded the National Farm Workers Association or NFWA, which would further evolve into nationally recognized worker protection organizations. The genius of the protests, would be the solidarity of many groups and organizations, understanding the necessity to focus on a common cause.

It is generally agreed that this movement, like other movements around the world, were greatly influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, and architects of the Civil Rights movement, such as A. Philip Randolph who founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925, and Bayard Rustin, who was indispensable in the organizing of the historic March on Washington in August of 1963. Writing for the Latino Association of Faculty and Staff, at California State University at San Marcos, this influence is evident. “A strong believer in the principles of nonviolence practiced by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar effectively employed peaceful tactics such as fasts, boycotts, strikes, and pilgrimages. In 1968 he fasted for 25 days to affirm his personal commitment and that of the farm labor movement to non-violence.”¹⁹

Black Public Theology must develop a methodology and pedagogy of not only protest; however, a systematic methodology and pedagogy for economic, educational, healthcare, and

¹⁹ LAFS, “Cesar E. Chavez,” para.10.

legal system reform. This response does not necessarily need to be informed by anger or outrage precipitated by episodic civil unrest, but rather preemptive-intentional with surgical like focus sustained over time. It need not be reactionary, but rather methodological and strategic.

The contribution of an African American religious pedagogy, to creating a black public theology, is at once dynamic and not static. It is an ongoing narrative telling the story of the African American experience in the United States and prior. Most importantly, Black Public Theology must be reimagined and realigned for relevance in an emerging world. It is not a monolithic voice told by a single narrator, nor a select few. Black Public Theology is the collective voices of many experiences emanating from the Black experience. It is as varied as the people who participate in it, as well as those impacted through its ubiquitous presence in all facets of American life.

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