

Chapter 2

Revelation and Liberation

Despite African Americans' long history of oppression, African American communities reflect significant strengths, derived in part from religion and religious beliefs. This chapter provides a brief review of the development of African American theology; the importance of religion in the development of African American culture; the theological derivation of themes of liberation, revelation, and power; and the ways in which these themes have become integrated into various aspects of African American culture. A discussion of male and female gender role, particularly understandings of what it means to be a man, is interwoven with the discussion of African American culture. The discussion provides an understanding of how African American religion and culture have both reflected and perpetuated antagonism and hostility toward homosexuality and homosexuals.

Revealed Word and African American Theology

Revelation has been defined as “the theological category used to describe what is known about God and how that knowledge occurs” (Stroup 1990, p. 1083). Scalise (1999, p. 95) has identified three ways of such knowing: (1) as the result of an individual's personal experiences that are shaped by his or her culture, such as seeing visions or experiencing the presence of God during his or her prayer; (2) as the result of a communally experienced event that is interpreted communally as an experience of God, such as the experience of God by the Hebrews during Exodus; and (3) through the recognition of a specified tradition, e.g., the Bible. The boundaries between these three mechanisms are fluid. For example, an event may be both an individual and a group event, such as when an individual studies scripture in a group. How the individual interprets and experiences the event is key to understanding the nature of the revelation.

Bennett (1989, pp. 129–130) aptly described the significance of revelation as a source of Black/African American theology:

The Bible, as revealed word ... tries to communicate something about the purposeful ordering of society as a sign of God's intentions for his creation. The literature of the old and new Israel is religious literature because it witnesses to God as the one not only creating but also maintaining and forcefully working out freedom for the oppressed in a community for the alien or alienated. Consequently the God-and-man relationship of peoplehood must be worked out in social and political institutions of nationhood. The quest for justice among men becomes the religious quest. Yet it is not only by the mighty acts of God himself, as at the exodus and conquest and in Jesus's [*sic*] life and resurrection, but also by human response to these divine motions that the model for society is forged.

Bennett posits the all-important question: "Why did the slave ancestors accept the religion of their oppressors?" (Bennett 1989, p. 131). In response, he suggests that "the Black forefathers were brought into slavery to find the God of justice and freedom" (Bennett 1989, p. 131). Rather than accepting the gospel as but a means of survival or as but a veneer to be superimposed upon religious beliefs derived from their African roots, Bennett asserts, consistent with the thesis of Charles Long and Lawrence Jones, that the message of Christianity echoed messages already familiar to and consistent with the message of the slaves' religious heritage. That message was/is that God is the creator (Bennett 1989, p. 132) and, as the actor in human events, He will "bring about his purposes for mankind" (Bennett 1989, p. 133). As such, Jesus is seen as a revolutionary who liberated the oppressed and questioned and opposed the established religious norms of his day (Bennett 1989, p. 137). Not surprisingly, then, liberation theology has been embraced as a vehicle by which to escape oppression and injustice.

Liberation Theology and the Struggle Against Oppression

Liberation theology emerged as a theological movement in the late 1950 s and early 1960 s in Christian churches in Latin America, most notably the Roman Catholic Church (Goizueta 2005, p. 703). The development of this movement has been attributed to three significant shifts that were occurring at that time: (1) the interpretation of Third World poverty through the lens of dependency theory, that is, that the poverty that existed in less economically developed countries was a direct result of their dependence on more economically developed nations; (2) the rapprochement that occurred between the world and the church as a result of the Second Vatican Council and the second General Conference of the conference of Latin American bishops in 1968; and (3) the growth and growing influence of Latin America's "base ecclesial communities."

Liberation theologians utilized these events as the basis for the formulation of a Christian theological vision that was rooted in the everyday experiences of Latin American Christians, including poverty and the struggle for justice. This approach received official support through the Second Vatican

Council's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World and the later General Conference of the conference of Latin American bishops. The bishops concluded that the poverty in which many were living was contrary to the will of God. This was interpreted as an endorsement of the developed grassroots movement involving the application of the gospel by poor Christians to civic and political activity (Goizueta 2005, p. 703).

Gustavo Gutiérrez a Peruvian priest and one of the foremost liberation theologians, identified three dimensions of liberation: (1) liberation from all forms of social, political, and economic oppression; (2) rejection by the poor of their suffering as a mandate of God, the development of an understanding of their poverty as rooted in social, historical, and human causes, and acceptance of their responsibility to act as agents of change; and (3) liberation from sin and death, as a gift from Jesus Christ (Goizueta 2005, p. 705), to enable mankind to live in communion with him and to facilitate human fellowship (Gutiérrez 1988, p. 25). The first two forms of liberation require human action; the third can only be brought about by Jesus Christ.

The development of black liberation theology and its theme of freedom mirror these three dimensions.⁹ Black liberation theology traces its beginnings to a survival tradition among slaves and a history of racial oppression (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, p. 176, 201). One scholar noted,

What may be called the liberation tradition in black religion also begins with the determination to survive, but because it is exterior rather than primarily interior (and for that reason its carriers find more space in which to maneuver) it goes beyond strategies of sheer survival to strategies of elevation—from “make do” to “must do more.” Both strategies are basic to Afro-American life and culture. They are intertwined in complex ways throughout the history of the diaspora. Both are responses to reality in a dominating white world (Wilmore 1983, p. 227).

Later events further propelled the development of black liberation theology. On July 31, 1966, the National Committee of Negro Churchmen released a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, titled “Black Power.” The statement was an attempt by Northern Black clergy to mediate the growing divide between Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy of nonviolence and calls by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee for black resistance to white oppression (Sneed 2010, p. 28). The “Black Manifesto,” released in 1967 following a Detroit conference that focused on the role of churches and synagogues in the alleviation of problems suffered by the urban poor, demanded monetary reparations to address the economic and educational inequities that had resulted from the slave trade (Sneed 2010, pp. 28–29). The theologian and academic James Cone made clear the connection between Black Power and Christianity:

It is my thesis ... that Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not an antithesis to Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is, rather, Christ's central message to twentieth-century America. And unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to capture the man Jesus through a total identification with the suffering poor as expressed in Black Power, that church will become exactly what Christ is not (Cone 1969, p. 2).

Joseph Washington's later call for a theology in the Black church added further momentum:

I believe, the religion of the Negro lacks the following: a sense of the historic Church, authentic roots in the Christian tradition, a meaningful theological frame of reference, a search for renewal, an ecumenical spirit, and a commitment to an inclusive Church" (Washington 1984, p. vii).¹⁰

Black experience of oppression by whites and the subsequent struggle for self-determination, power, and autonomy thus became the foundation for black liberation theology; black liberation theology served as the religious corollary of Black power. According to Kacela (2005, p. 201), "Black liberation theology is a discipline committed to justice issues for the people of God, particularly African Americans." He has argued that this perspective is largely rooted in justifiable anger at the injustices that have been inflicted on Blacks, a position that stands in sharp contrast to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s espousal of love.¹¹ As Alves (1977, p. 134) has noted, whatever the world is, it is a construction of humans that can be changed; this is the underlying premise of liberation theology. Black theology and liberation are inextricably intertwined in their focus on human transformation:

Black theology is a theology of liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, this providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says no to the encroachment of white oppression (National Committee of Black Churchmen 1969, in Wilmore and Cone 1979, p. 101).

That the God of Black liberation theology is black has its roots in the survival tradition (Washington 1984, p. xvi). It has been noted that "the color of God could only assume importance in a society in which color played a major part in the determination of human capacity, human privilege and human value" (Lincoln 1974, p. 148). Indeed, it is doubtful that black individuals could identify with and feel protected by a white God in such a context (Lincoln 1974, p. 149). Bishop Henry McNeil Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church asserted:

We have as much right biblically and otherwise to believe that God is a Negro, as you buckra or white people have to believe that God is a fine looking, symmetrical and ornamented white man.... Every race of people since time began who have attempted to describe their God by words, or by paintings, or by carvings, or by any other form or figure, have conveyed the idea that the God who made them and shaped their destinies was symbolized in themselves, and why should not the Negro believe that he resembles God as much as other people? (quoted in Wilmore 1983, p. 125).¹²

Accordingly, Jesus as Black had—and continues to have—both political and theological implications. Indeed,

[i]t was [Blacks'] way of saying that his cross and resurrection represented God's solidarity with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. The oppressed do not have to accept their present misery as the final definition of their humanity. The poor no longer have to remain in poverty. They are now free to fight for their freedom, because God is fighting with them (Cone 1989, p. 189).

Black Culture: Reflections of Liberation, Revelation, and Power

Themes of liberation and revelation are evident in African American culture, reflected in the various components that comprise Black popular culture: (1) an emergence from West and Central African cultures, the transatlantic slave trade, and colonialism; (2) a sufficiently large population to voice and evidence common values, beliefs, and goals; (3) a collective life experience of racial and cultural discrimination, segregation, and identification that has given rise to a sense of solidarity and community; (4) a “black aesthetic” reflecting a post-slavery, post-colonial Black identity; and (5) a desire to bear witness to cultural difference (Powell 2002, pp. 14–15). These motifs are echoed in varying degrees in African American literature produced during the early twentieth century, such as James Weldon Johnson’s 1912 novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which follows the protagonist from his mixed racial beginnings in the segregated South to his ultimate decision to pass as White (Powell 2002, p. 30).

Unlike Johnson, many African American artists were critical of the racism that prevailed in the U.S. These included the writer William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, who denounced then-President Roosevelt’s dishonorable discharge of an entire battalion of African American soldiers in Texas; the sculptor Scott Hathaway, whose plaster busts honored the educator Booker T. Washington; the poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar; and the sculptor Meta Vaux Warnick Fuller, who created in 1907 a 14-part tableau depicting “the Negro’s progress” and in 1914 a statue of a woman of African ancestry entitled “The Awakening of Ethiopia” (Powell 2002, pp. 34–36).

The Negro Renaissance of the 1920 s and 1930 s, also known as the “Negro Literary Renaissance,” the “New Negro Arts Movement,” and “Manhattan’s Black Renaissance” permitted African American artists access to mainstream venues and media that had previously been closed to them (Powell 2002, p. 50). Harlem became an important cultural center for many African American painters, writers, and photographers. Paris, too, attracted many African Americans, some of whom had become acquainted with the city through their service in the military during World War I. Paris—and France in general—appeared to offer greater freedom than was possible in the still-segregated U.S. (Powell 2002, p. 56).

The concept of the “New Negro,” embodying themes of urbanity, progress, growth, and rebirth took hold and were reflected in the works of Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and Ethel Waters (Powell 2002, p. 41). The appearance of the African American dancer Josephine Baker on a Paris stage in 1925 was said to have defined the “New Negro” in Paris (Powell 2002, p. 59). Artists of the Harlem Renaissance, seeking to “rewrite racist stereotypes,” portrayed Blacks as descendants of Egyptian civilization (Goesser 2007, pp. 173–174), although the Blacks who had been brought to the colonies/United States had their origin in West Africa, not in Egypt (Lincoln 1989, p. 7). These linkages between an Egyptian heritage and the modern African American are evident in

numerous artistic works of the period, including the 1928 illustration by Aaron Douglas of silhouetted African American figures against modern buildings; in Charles Dawson's 1927 illustration of an African American female dressed in an Egyptian-style headdress and breastplate; and in James L. Wells' juxtaposition in a 1931 linocut of a Black youth and an Egyptian pyramid (Goeser 2007, pp. 175–180).

Even works by female African American artists of the Harlem Renaissance promoted an image of the modern African American woman as light-skinned, sensuous, and Europeanized (Goeser 2007, p. 190). While these images may have helped to counter the existing derogatory portrayals of African American women as mammies and all female children as pickaninnies¹³ (Goeser 2007, pp. 5–6), it can also be argued that such representations of African American women led to the further concretization of stereotypes focused on Black sexualities, a preference for “light skin” color, and the entrenchment of male and female gender roles within African American communities.

During the period of time known as the Harlem Renaissance, African American artists and authors increasingly focused their attention on themes of religion and religious devotion. African American illustrators and writers challenged through their work “white religious preconceptions” and the “dominant color paradigm” in which black had come to symbolize evil and white to represent holiness (Goeser 2007, p. 207). Aaron Douglas, for example, portrayed Adam as an African American man in his 1927 “Creation.” Langston Hughes referred in his poem “Christ in Alabama” to the victims of Southern lynching as “Nigger Christ(s)/On the cross of the South” (Goeser 2007, p. 207).

This incorporation of Black figures into Western artistic religious conventions was premised in part on the style of biblical exegesis known as Ethiopianism (Goeser 2007, p. 215). This approach to Biblical interpretation was initiated in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by African theologians who took Psalm 68:31—“Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”—as a sign that individuals of African descent would experience a renaissance through their relationship with God (Moses 1978, p. 157). Rather than viewing black skin as the result of Ham's curse for staring at his father's nakedness (Genesis 9:20–27), Ethiopianists viewed black skin as a gift and a mark of the prophetic abilities of individuals of African descent (Goeser 2007, p. 215). The one-act play, *The First One*, authored by Zora Neale Hurston, reflected Ethiopianism in its reinterpretation of Noah's curse against Ham (Hurston 1927, pp. 55–57). This perspective is also evident in the poem by the African American poet Countee Cullen entitled “Colors,” in which she portrays Simon as a loyal follower of Christ, unlike Simon's White counterparts:

Yea, he who helped Christ up Golotha's track,
That Simon who did *not* deny, was black (Cullen 1927, p. 11).

Du Bois recognized in his writings the importance of Christianity to the African American community. He emphasized the association between Christ's simple life and that of working-class African Americans, “describing the infant Christ

as ‘lying in a manger, down among lowly black folk’” (Du Bois 1926, title page; Goesser 2007, p. 211).

Other writers extended their work beyond the parameters of Ethiopianism, transforming religious figures traditionally portrayed as White into figures that were Black, e.g., Adam, shepherds, the angel Gabriel, the prodigal son, Jesus, and the Madonna (Goesser 2007, pp. 221–223). The transformation of a White God into one of color soon became wed to politics when Marcus Garvey of the Universal Negro Improvement Association urged marchers in its August 1924 convention to recognize Jesus as “the Black Man of Sorrows” and the Virgin Mary as a Black woman (Garvey 1924, pp. 747–648).¹⁴ Numerous African American artists and writers, including the artist E. Campbell Simms and the writers Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, drew parallels between Christ’s crucifixion on the cross and the lynching of Black men in the South for crimes that they did not commit. In response to the clear miscarriage of justice in the trial of the Scottsboro, Alabama boys accused of raping two White women, Langston Hughes (1931, p. 1) authored the poem *Christ in Alabama*:

Christ is a Nigger,
 Beaten and black—
 O, bare your back.
 Mary is His Mother—
 Mammy of the South,
 Silence your mouth.
 God’s His Father—
 White Master above,
 Grant us your love.
 Most holy bastard
 Of the bleeding mouth:
 Nigger Christ
 On the cross of the South.

This era also saw a growing debate among Harlem Renaissance artists and others surrounding the appropriate style of church worship. While some adopted the more conservative styles of the White Protestant churches, others, such as Langston Hughes, heralded ecstatic worship as a form to be celebrated (Goesser 2007, p. 212). Even today, the “average Black congregation “is a singing church—a fact well documented by the legions who have risen to fame and fortune in the world of secular music but who began their careers with the choirs of the local black churches” (Spillers 1971, p. 25, quoted in Marable 1989, p. 331).

Many of the artists attended church because it provided opportunities that were not otherwise available to African Americans at the time. The writer James Weldon Johnson explained:

Going to church is an outlet for the Negro’s religious emotions; but not the least reason why he is willing to support so many churches is that they furnish so many agreeable activities and so much real enjoyment. He is willing to support them because he has not yet, and will not have until there is far greater economic and intellectual development and social organization, any other agencies that can fill their place (Johnson 1930, 1991, pp. 165–166).

The 1927 compilation of poems, essays, and illustrations by Charles S. Johnson in *Ebony and Topaz* addressed issues of mixed race identity, homosexuality, bisexuality, and transvestism (Goeser 2007, pp. 249–264), themes that were rarely addressed. With the advent of the Depression, African American artists and writers increasingly emphasized issues such as economic hardship, unemployment, and industry in African American art and literature. The rape charges brought against the African American men in Scottsboro, Alabama gave rise to themes of cultural and social uprising, both in the U.S. and France (Powell 2002, p. 78).

The period from 1940 through 1963 has been portrayed as one involving multiple transformations of African American culture. Protest and pessimism became evident in the writings of Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright (Powell 2002, p. 89).

According to some scholars, there has been a resurgence of Black cultural nationalism in the United States during the past two decades (Ransby and Matthews 1993, p. 58). This resurgence, attributed to a growing sense of frustration within African American communities, is evidenced in the cultural movement of Afrocentrism, increasing interest in Malcolm X, and the emergence and proliferation of hip-hop/rap culture. Each of these trends both adopts an oppositional stance toward conventional authority and embodies a male-centered vision of empowerment and liberation, resulting in the marginalization and denigration of those not perceived as sufficiently masculine, i.e., women and homosexuals (Ransby and Matthews, 1993, p. 57).

Afrocentrism has been defined as “a methodology for scholarship and political practice which puts people of African descent at the centre, rather than in the margins ...” (Ransby and Matthews 1993, p. 58). It is often presented as a return to the African roots of the American African American communities, a history that is often simplistically portrayed as classless, conflict-free, and lacking in diversity. These African roots, according to Afrocentrism, harken back to a place and time in the world when the roles of men and women were “complementary”: men ruled and women obeyed (Ransby and Matthews 1993, p. 59). Asante, who championed Afrocentrism, condemned homosexuality and exhorted African American men “to redeem [their] Black manhood through Afrocentric action” (Asante 1980, p. 21).

The struggle for Black liberation is often attributed almost entirely to Malcolm X and various groups such as the Black Panther Party; the contributions of not only women, but also men who identified as homosexual, such as Bayard Rustin, are frequently ignored (Alexander 2004, p. 79; Ransby and Matthews 1993, p. 62). This portrayal of African Americans’ struggles for equality creates the erroneous impression that Malcolm X was a sexist, albeit a protective patriarch as well (Ransby and Matthews 1993, p. 63).

Hip-hop, also known as rap, originated in the Bronx in New York during the mid-1970s (Neal 1999). Often associated with a youth-oriented African American culture, the genre appears to be the product of a transformation from the physical gang terrorization of Bronx neighborhoods to gangs’ war of words in which graffiti was used for self-promotion and to mark gang territory (Hager 1984, p. 29). The use of words progressed to become hip-hop, “a form of rhymed storytelling

accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music” (Rose 1994, p. 2). Hip-hop as a culture is said to embody four distinct features: breaking, or break dancing; tagging or bombing, referring to the marking of walls of buildings and subways with graffiti; DJ-ing, meaning “collaging” music by using two turntables; and MC-ing, or rapping (Hager 1984). Although there are a few female rappers and a few admittedly gay rappers, hip-hop is dominated by “masculine” men, “real” men who have a penis; act in a manner that is perceived to be masculine, that is, not like a “faggot” (McLeod 1999, p. 142); and often glorify and/or are involved in criminal activities (Hager 1984, pp. 80–87). Hip-hop is blatantly homophobic (Byers 1997, p. 108; Ginsky 2000; Hardy 1997, p. 109; Shoals 2011). The lyrics to Lil’ Wayne’s “Go DJ” from the album *Ready to Die* provide one example:

You snakes, stop hidin in the grass,
Sooner or later I’ll cut it knock the blades in yo ass,
You homo niggas getting AIDS in the ass,
While the homie here tryna get paid in advance”
While the homie here tryna get paid in advance”

Byron Hurt, director of the documentary “Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes” that explores hip-hop’s stereotypes about masculinity, explained the root of hip-hop’s homophobia in an interview:

We’re in a box. And in order to be in that box, you have to be strong, you have to be tough, you have to have a lot of girls, you gotta have money, you have to be a player or a pimp, know you gotta be in control, you have to dominate other men, other people, and if you are not any of those things, then you know people will call you soft, or weak, or a pussy, or a chump, or a faggot, and nobody wants to be any of those things. So everybody stays in the box (Hurt, quoted in Choy 2012).

Summary

Religion and church participation have played a major role in the survival of African Americans, their communities, and their culture. Religion and the church have afforded African Americans an opportunity to recast their image from that of deficiency and deviance to one of power and strength. Liberation theology, in particular, has served as a basis for the visualization and effectuation of independence, justice, and human transformation. Themes of liberation, revelation, and power are reflected in African American art, literature, and music. The contributions made by self-identified homosexuals (and women) to liberation efforts have frequently been downplayed or ignored. More recently, conceptualizations of masculinity within some segments of African American society have evolved to emphasize violence, the denigration of women, and the portrayal of homosexuals as weak and deviant.

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