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# The Sacred as the Basis for Human Creativity and Agency in the Black Church<sup>1</sup>

by Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Religion is, I believe, the most important site for human creativity, innovation, and agency. In the world of the sacred in any social context, one is able to find the widest variety of human constructions of meaning. Indeed, the true understanding of human diversity may be found in the study of religion and the processes through which people sustain and renew their religious organizations and their religious world views. It is important, I think, to apply these new insights to the study of the African-American religious experience. The Black church,<sup>2</sup> or the collective experience of African-American Christians in the United States, is important for a number of reasons but most especially because it had been the basis for an ethnic identity and the context for mobilization for social change.

The discussion in this essay attempts to integrate several lines of inquiry related to this observation. It is based on a research project focused on the Sanctified Church. Initially fueled by an interest in the emergence of new African-American religious congregations and denominations at a critical juncture in America's racial-ethnic historical outline—in other words a problem focused on social change and community reorganization at the end of Reconstruction and during the rise of Jim Crow, that interest broadened into an examination of the way in which religion fostered cultural identity and community, especially among African Americans. The research occurred at a moment of unprecedented interaction among African Americans from diverse strands of the African-American religious experience as the “golden cohort” benefitting from the open doors created by the Civil Rights Movement entered colleges, changed churches, and provided the nucleus for the growth of African-American mega-churches and the rise of what Lincoln and Mamiya have called “Neo-Pentecostalism.”<sup>3</sup> Observations of key congregations and national meetings of the Sanctified Church underscored the dynamics of continuity across denominational boundaries in spite of the still-salient histories of conflict with Baptist and Methodist churches.

The activities that fostered continuity generated an interest in other national and regional religious meetings where African-American church organizations and selected other groups utilized religious ritual as an essential component of their “conventions” or national

meetings.<sup>4</sup> The relationship between convention and community became one of several lines of inquiry that grew out of my study of the Sanctified church that sought to understand the historical processes through which an African-American religious imagination (world-view, ethos) was constituted and sustained. The insights from these formal observations have been augmented by my “insider” activities as an African-American clergywoman attached to a congregation and active with several national organizations.

The event that forms the core perspective and inspiration for this paper actually comes from one of my insider activities as parliamentarian for a small regional Baptist convention in New England. The distinctive problems and constraints faced by the actors in the site renders the taken-for-granted aspects of religious life in the African-American experience highly problematic. The dislocations and discontinuities offer opportunities for discourses and activities surrounding the role and meaning of tradition that highlight the importance of what Emirbayer calls “the dynamic moment of human agency.”<sup>5</sup> While this paper will focus on the framing, constituting, and production of the sacred in the diverse contexts of African-American church and community organizations, it will also explore the ways in which these activities connect actors to the larger project of constituting and sustaining a national community and generating an oppositional/critical/counter hegemonic consciousness/conscience as they address the problems of surviving in a hostile society and of engendering and fostering change in that society. Indeed it may be that for oppressed racial-ethnic groups like African Americans in the United States, groups whose identities, personhood, and humanity are contested and negated through social, cultural, economic, and political challenges, ritual space becomes the most important site for considering the moral dimension of social life.

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*...I began to see the framing of the Sacred as a core activity for asserting humanity...*

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On a particular evening at a particular Baptist convention I began to see the framing of the Sacred as a core activity for asserting humanity (or maintaining the perpetual uplift of our moral being) that is reflected in a wide range of settings from the ritual behavior of street gangs in the underclass, the Million Man March, and the growth of the mega-churches among new and newly configured Black middle classes. Indeed, it may be that this framing of the Sacred may be, for the oppressed, the essential foundation for the production of their humanity.

## **I Want to Know Where I Am!**

The setting is a New England hotel about ninety

This essay is based on a paper prepared for presentation at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, “I Want to Know Where I Am: Framing the Sacred in African-American Life and Culture” Nashville, Tennessee (November 9, 1996).

minutes from Boston. It is a resort hotel with all sorts of amenities. The Baptist convention booked barely enough rooms to have access to the large meeting room. Until the last five years, this regional convention had met in churches. Since the annual meeting took place in July, the heat in some of the host churches would become unbearable and with increasing frequency, participants in the meeting would collapse from the heat or from other medical conditions aggravated by the heat. Unlike southern congregations, it is not economically feasible for New England churches to acquire air conditioning. A few new churches have built it in, but restricting meetings to churches with air conditioning would restrict the ability of the convention to be inclusive of its entire constituency. The coldness and the diffuseness of the hotel meeting room are apparent and utterly daunting. This is the evening that the convention's Board of Evangelism has chosen to invite a member pastor to deliver a sermon. The preacher of that evening, wearing the white suit of African-American Baptist tradition, stands at the back, pausing to survey the room. When the members of the Board and other officers are ready, they all come forward together and take their seats.

A service with singing and prayer begins and then the preacher of the evening is invited to deliver his sermon. As he approached the podium that is now supposed to be his pulpit, he tossed his handkerchief over the microphone and said, "I want to know where I am." Then he "raised" the hymn, "A Charge to Keep." First he lined out the opening line, "A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify." Immediately the people present followed with the slow pantatonic response that is affectionately called the "common meter" or "Dr. Watts" style of singing.<sup>6</sup> Younger musicians unfamiliar with this style had to be restrained as they attempted to find the tune on the piano or electronic keyboards. Young people who had not learned to sing in this style looked around in shock as some of the most sedate of their Sunday School teachers and pastors closed their eyes, began to sing what seemed to be a most mournful sound, and in some cases began to weep and to shout.

By the time the evening preacher began to "line out" the second half of the stanza, "A never dying soul to save and fit it for the sky," the assembled group had become a congregation. They had found a shared cadence and various individuals had begun to rock and sway to foster and establish that cadence. Unlike other forms of music where musicians and choirs established the rhythms and the beat, common meter hymns depend upon the congregation's reaching a shared definition of the situation during the hymn. Pitch and meter are negotiated between song leader and congregation and the hierarchy of diverse voices varies as the key arrived at and pitch of the leader may vary. Like spirituals, the common meter hymns are the songs of the hush harbors when, during slavery, the congregation was required first to establish the situation and then live it. The processes by which the situation was defined or framed in these circumstances always took place in situations where simply stealing

away to be religious and to frame sacred space was an act of oppositional consciousness/conscience. To frame such a setting through the negotiated order of voices of a diverse congregation was to frame a community and to reconstitute its consciousness. In those brief moments at a Baptist convention in New England, a connection with tradition was rekindled and a specific community of sacred memory was framed.

For a number of young people in the room, the moment paralleled a similar moment described by W.E.B. Du Bois in his ground breaking essay, "Faith of the Fathers."<sup>7</sup> Du Bois as a young New Englander, was sent to the South to study at Fisk University. As was true for other Black colleges, Fisk students were sent into the countryside to teach in rural communities during the summer. Du Bois, during one of these summer teaching jobs, witnessed his first revival. His reflections on that first encounter with the core elements ("elementary forms") of African-American religious tradition led him to write an essay identifying those elements, the preacher, the music, and the frenzy, at least ten years prior to Durkheim's publication of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.<sup>8</sup>

As with much of Du Bois's work, the continuing contemporary relevance of his observations require some translation.<sup>9</sup> Du Bois accurately identified the role of the preacher as critical for understanding the importance of indigenous, flexible, creative, and multi-talented leadership and the primacy of spiritual leadership. Although we now know that indigenous leaders whose authority is charismatic and spiritually grounded are not limited to the preachers, most other leaders in the African-American community have strong groundings in the church. Du Bois identified the music as the second important dimension. Here he was more concerned with identifying the genius and the source of influence that African Americans exerted over the culture at large and the roots of that contribution in both their African heritage and American experience. Without saying so, Du Bois hints that the music illustrates the processes of adaptation and change that have emerged from cultural choices that slaves made under the stress of experience, an emergent and nascent theory of cultural agency. Thirdly, Du Bois saw "the frenzy" or, more accurately "Shouting" as a fundamental of this distinctive experience. It was here that the shared interaction that governed the setting of the church at once illuminated and constituted the cultural whole.

If Du Bois's essay may be viewed as a preliminary identification of the "elementals" or "basics" of the African-American religious experience, then he was identifying the very processes by which African Americans construct and invoke the sacred moment. When the evangelistic preacher of the evening declared, "I want to know where I am," he initiated a process of religious agency that enabled the assembled people to become a particular kind of social world, to define a situation in terms that allowed people to connect their lives and the sacred moment to a history whose threads were interwoven with sacred definitions.

The imprimatur of the collective definition of the Sacred also constitutes an assertion of humanity and collective identity that continues to reframe the nation in a variety of situations. The behavior of the congregation when compared to the behavior in other settings where African Americans invoke and construct the Sacred invites an analysis of the larger variety of settings where African Americans use components of the Sacred to define and to manage other affairs. This incident also invites us to uncover the importance of convocations and conventions in the national life of African Americans.

In the case of the Baptist convention, the insistence, “I want to know where I am,” led to a ritual of definition, affirmation, and inclusion. Undergirding the possibility of all of this was something more basic to the African-American religious experience: what we may wish to call rituals of collusion. The situation was defined by the response of others; it was defined by the affirmation of others that they shared a reality. Furthermore, people by raising their voices made an investment or a promise to uphold the situation. Erving Goffman offered a complex theory of “basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events and to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject.”<sup>10</sup> An important element of the process by which definitions of situations are defined and sustained is what he calls “collusion.” Collusion occurs, according to Goffman, “when three or more persons sustain a state of talk” and when “a certain amount of ‘registering’ occurs: while one character performs a deed, another tends to register visibly his response to it.”

It was the registered visible response that alerted this preacher to the fact that in spite of the trappings of the affluent, upper-middle class that characterized the convention hotel, there were enough people there to constitute a traditional African-American congregation where certain shared understandings could be discussed and affirmed. His very traditional sermon that followed, included an important auto-ethnography of his life growing up in the Mississippi Delta and the meanings and practices associated with being religious. The ritual of collusion made possible a ritual of community memory, another basic form of religious experience. Before there was Goffman’s theory of framing, there was an African-American religious experience that generated the truism, “where two or three touch and agree....” Besides its denominational bodies, the Black church also consists of a wide variety of organizations that also meet nationally and whose activities involve a variety of sacred frameworks. The utilization of these frameworks was part of the genius of the Million Man March that was largely lost on the press and the white public. It was difficult for most white Americans to separate Farrakhan from the March and yet the March, although ostensibly organized by the Nation of Islam, reached out to and allowed for a variety of African-American constituencies to contribute to a complex ritual of multiple layered framing. Without an insider’s understanding of these frames and the constituencies associated with them, much of what was said and done,

including large portions of Farrakhan’s speech, were simply lost.

### Framing the Sacred, Framing the Nation

For African Americans, the history of their religious experience and other cultural forms has involved a constant struggle with a dominant definition of the situation at variance and sometimes hostile to their own. As our research on African-American history seeks to understand better the complexities of life in a pluralistic and oppressive society, particularly the cultural industry of enslaved people and its consequences for later community life, we come to understand better the ways in which people circumscribed by ideologies of diminished or non-existent humanity (racism) insisted upon asserting their humanity. Religion was one of these critical sites.

Historical and sociological analyses of the Black church have pointed to the Church as the “center” of social life and a “nation within a nation.” Lincoln and Mamiya have identified a set of dialectically related polarities within which African Americans shape the religious dimension of their experience.<sup>11</sup> More attention to the production of the Sacred, the framing of the Sacred, in African-American life and culture will motivate us to appreciate better the complex levels of human agency required to negotiate these polarities across the diversities within the African-American community. At the same time we can better uncover the ways in which collusive framings help to constitute and sustain a national consciousness, an ethnic reality. It is possible that the production of the Sacred, the framing of the Sacred is the most vital way in which the community/nation itself is framed and maintained. The act of defining “where I am” may be an elementary form of religious conduct that holds the key to a form of human agency that forms and informs community boundaries for a wide variety of groups in pluralistic societies. The study of framing the Sacred or producing the Sacred may provide a new and revitalized approach to a sociology of the religions of the oppressed.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In loving and respectful memory of Reverend George O’Neill.

<sup>2</sup>When I use the term, “the Black church,” I am using it the way Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya used the term to talk about the churches and experiences of African-American Christians in the United States. The term in no way implies one large over-arching ecstatic involving just Black people. See Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press 1990).

<sup>3</sup>I disagree with Lincoln and Mamiya’s formulation. What they refer to as “Neo-Pentecostalism” is a rearticulation of African-American ecstatic religious traditions. One of the features of churches such as the Church of God in Christ is their histories of defending the core and distinctive traditions of African-American religious practice. Not only is the Church of God in Christ the first Black Pentecostal denomination, but it is the first Pentecostal denomination. In existence before the Azusa Street Revival, the Church of God in Christ emerged as a Holiness denomination from a late nineteenth century controversy among Black Mississippi Baptists and involved a stated resistance to the encroaching formalism in Black churches. This church, as part of a larger community of churches that African Americans call collectively the Sanctified Church, has been in a culturally symbiotic relationship to the rest of the Black church since its existence. The resurgence and rearticulation of tradition that Lincoln and Mamiya call neo-pentecostalism was simply a more dramatic version of a process that had been endemic to the Black church since Emancipation.

<sup>4</sup>The importance of national meetings or conventions has been discussed in detail by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her study of the women’s convention

within the National Baptist Convention. Building upon the work of E. Franklin Frazier, she points out the importance of the national meeting or convention in constituting the nation within a nation that the Black church often is. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>Mustafa Emirbayer. "Useful Durkheim," *Sociological Theory* 14 (July 2, 1996), p. 111.

<sup>6</sup>The term "common meter" is used popularly by African Americans to refer to a style of singing involving the lining out of hymns and the congregation's response, usually in a very slow and majestically cadenced style.

<sup>7</sup>W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications Inc., [1903, 1953, 1961]), pp. 140-51.

<sup>8</sup>Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [A New Translation by Karen E. Fields] (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup>Unfortunately, many readings of Du Bois's work fail to translate his nineteenth century English with all of its King James influence. We often forget that the Bible was required reading for students and that when Du Bois uses words like "awful" it is often the equivalent of today's usage of "awesome." This is a problem for the critiques that are currently being developed of Du Bois's work.

<sup>10</sup>Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974).

<sup>11</sup>In moving beyond the simplicities of other explanatory models (the assimilation model, the isolation model, the compensatory model, the ethnic-community prophetic model), Lincoln and Mamiya offer the following dialectical tensions as a key to understanding the Black church in a more holistic perspective: the priestly and prophetic functions; other worldly versus this worldly orientations; universalism and particularism in approaches to racial history; the communal and the privatistic in institutional practices; the charismatic versus the bureaucratic in organizational forms; and the dialectic between resistance and accommodation. See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.

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