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Psychological Trauma, Christ's Passion, and the African American Faith Tradition

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This article argues that Christ's passion/crucifixion functioned within the African American psyche as a religious narrative and symbol that uniquely addressed the severe trauma they underwent during the Middle Passage and slavery by enabling them to experience the presence of God in the depths of extreme suffering. Christ's passion/crucifixion mirrored their experience of racial oppression and, thereby, provided a critique of the system and actors that perpetuated it. The Spiritual "Were You There?" is interpreted in this light. This correspondence between the African American's historical experience and the narrative symbol of Christ's passion/crucifixion helps explain their conversion to Christianity.

KEY WORDS: African Americans; Middle Passage; slavery; trauma; crucifixion; conversion; passion; Christ.

"O sometimes it causes me to tremble . . . Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Negro Spiritual

This article was instigated by the furor caused by Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. We observed the criticisms of the movie by biblical scholars, Christian theologians, and ethicists expanding beyond the movie itself into critiques of Christian atonement theory. Some atonement theory critics have

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suggested that a Christian piety that focuses excessively on Jesus' passion leads inevitably to passivity, resignation, and victimization or—at the other extreme—violence. Privileging Jesus' death over his life and ministry, it has been argued, robs Jesus of agency and effaces an understanding of why he died from the Gospel message. This argument has extended into expressions of incredulity regarding how a loving God could cause his/her son to die for the sins of others that concludes that this amounts to child abuse. By implication, the critics argue, this induces forms of psychopathology in the minds of those naïve enough to believe in such an outdated theological construct.

As an historian and theologian lodged firmly in the African American faith tradition, we are writing this article as a protest against critiques of the vicarious nature of Christ's Passion's that ignore that tradition. We are using a phenomenological method of sorts to describe how African American's faith tradition was constituted through their participation in Christ's Passion. This phenomenology will be elaborated by focusing on the African American Spiritual, "Were You There." However, before launching into that discussion we will describe the traumatic nature of the African American historical experience. In so doing we will seek to demonstrate that it was not the centrality of Christ's Passion in the African American faith tradition that rendered them vulnerable to psychopathology but, rather, the experience of white racist oppression during and after slavery.

African American's manner of interpreting and appropriating the meaning and reality of Christ's Passion facilitated their ability to survive, resist, and even rebel against the ordeal of racial oppression and violence they underwent.

TRAUMA AND TRANSFORMATION

The way African Americans imagine the Passion of Christ is due to the peculiar traumatic nature of their historical experience. African Americans became the focus of extreme, arbitrary and consistent brutality. Beatings according to slave testimonies and other accounts were common occurrences and often severe. It was not uncommon for slaves to be beaten within a hair's breath of their lives and did occasionally die from their wounds. The pain was at times enhanced with the application of substances like salt to their wounds. All while others were made to watch. It was not uncommon for the beatings to be accompanied by the threat of death. In fact all African Americans labored daily under the immanent threat of violence which could come not only from their masters but any white person. All African Americans were aware of their vulnerability to the whims of white folk free, by and large, to do as they pleased with their property, a condition of their existence that African American women were all too often made even more painfully aware. The fear and reality of forced separations through sales, that separated mothers as well as fathers from their children with all the attendant horrors associated with the unknown and the terrifying rumors emanating from the deep south as cotton emerged as the primary cash crop deepened and textured

the traumatic field in which African American subjectivity took shape. The entire institution of slavery and later segregation rested on the intentional degradation of African Americans for the purpose of maintaining the stability of the socio-cultural order and its economic benefits. Violence and the threat of violence remained a key element in its enforcement. Violence, for that matter, functions much in the same way today for African Americans although the scene of engagement has largely shifted to law enforcement and the criminal justice system with all of *its* attendant horrors. One can easily underestimate the impact of intangibles like prevailing cultural taxonomies, fear, shame, chronic mourning, vulnerability, social alienation, marginalization and muted despair and the extent to which they were strengthened and reinforced within the framework of routinized daily practices, on the formation of African American Christian consciousness.

The deeply disturbing silences on or *relative* ease (and lack of detail) with which certain accounts of beatings, rapes, degrading epithets, other shameful experiences and brutal work regimens were given, recorded or recalled is characteristic of dissociative experiences, numbing and denial of traumatized persons or their efforts to manage potentially overwhelming affect. This should, at least, give one pause. For years the unspoken, unacknowledged, often unconscious but operative assumption that African American's mental life was simple and less subject to complex reactions than that of their white counterparts have prevented a thorough examination of available material. Not to mention what can be discovered from working our way back from an analysis refitted with the assumption of African American "humanity" factored in, given the materials brought to light by the recent explosion in studies on trauma, chronic stress and coping. A casual perusal of this literature read in association with even the more moderate accounts of the "barbarous institution" and the thinly veiled barbarity of those that engaged in its practice is enough to make one shudder at the tremendous strum and drang of the inner life of African Americans and stand in awe at the relative effectiveness of their coping strategies as well as their spiritual endurance and strength.

While profound suffering and distress marked the African American soul from the earliest beginnings of inland capture, the long, arduous journey to the still haunted prisons beneath the great costal castles of Sub-Saharan West Africa, the Middle Passage, slavery and beyond, through to the violent, fear infested ghettos, prisons and forgotten rural enclaves of today, African Americans have consistently, albeit unevenly, resisted disintegration. Our resistance is rooted deeply in our culture. The culture has both shaped and been shaped by it. In fact the deepest manifestation of resistance has been the emergence of culture itself and not necessarily one of explicit political responses. Whether it is, or aspects of it are considered adaptive or maladaptive, escapist or revolutionary, conservative or progressive it remains a tremendous testimony to the resilience of the human spirit and the immanence of a transcendent creative power that, however expressed, is essentially life affirming and therefore divine at its root. This creativity was immanent in the sense that it worked in and through the intersubjective reality of the

African American present while at the same time transcendent in the sense it moves out beyond the present with all its ambiguities and pain toward future possibilities that remained realizable within this life and if not, the next. So instead of a radical break between this life and the next, it is probably more accurate to characterize it more as a continuum in African American Christian consciousness. In a paradoxical sense the boundaries between what is called this world and the next or other as you would have it was much more fluid than the radical discontinuity implied in traditional European American conceptions. The most powerful expression of this creativity has been the titanic spirituality of African America emanating from its epicenter, the Christian Church, and permeating the whole of the culture.

We have taken pains to articulate the African American condition because it is the context in which the Gospel was appropriated as at once an expression of their own suffering, tragic state or condition and the foundation for their transformative solidarity with Christ in his Passion. The Gospel, as *it was received* by African Americans was transformed as it was cycled through their "tragic soul-life," yielding a unique expression of its depths. That the Christian Gospel lent itself to this appropriation and particular expression is deeply rooted in the Passion of Christ and its mythopoetic structure. A more thorough analysis of the nature of African American Christian consciousness is of course beyond the scope of this essay. We will nevertheless try to highlight some essential aspects relevant to this discussion.

AFRICAN AMERICAN'S "THEOLOGIA CRUCIS"

As we described above, the religion and consciousness of African Americans have been largely determined by what African Americans underwent during the Middle Passage and slavery. The sensibility of African American Christians is form of "theologia cruces" or theology of the cross. African Americans did not have trained theologians to explicitly articulate this theology but this sensibility about the nature of the Christian faith is expressed in their Spirituals, extant slave sermons, narratives, and conversions accounts. Jürgen Moltmann wrote in *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation of Christian Theology* that "the God of the poor, the peasant and the slave has always been the poor, suffering, unprotected Christ, whereas the God of Empires and rulers has always been the Pantocrator, Christ enthroned in heaven" (Moltmann, 1974, pp. 45–46).

Slaves developed their image of Christ and their theology of the cross under the harsh conditions of slavery. Understanding the nature of their experience under this condition helps us to interpret the texts they generated while enduring its hardships. One text in particular is the Spiritual, "Were You There?"

> Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
> Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
> Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble,
> Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

The lyrics of the Spirituals were taken from other Christian hymns, biblical verses, and sermons that were combined and improvised upon to express and invoke the collective mood of those who sung them. The Spiritual was a patchwork quilt each of whose parts was always multivalent. Not all the Spirituals were sorrow songs; some of them were shouted and expressed the joy the slave's experience when under the influence of the Holy Spirit. But some Spirituals did ponder the mystery of human suffering and brought the singers into an encounter that caused trembling. Christ's Passion was a narrative image that was most central in the African American religious imagination and served an essential role in their survival, adaptation, and resistance against racial violence and oppression.

Once arriving to these shores, Africans had to begin to make the long adjustment that would result in an African American identity and their conversion to Christianity was integral to this process. In *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in Antebellum South* Raboteau (1978) describes the slaves' conversion to the faith of their white owners as a dimension of their adaptation to their new environment. However, slave masters initially had strong reservations against allowing the contact between their slaves and Christian missionaries because they rightly suspected that this would lead, either directly or indirectly, to insubordination and insurrection. White missionaries found it necessary, therefore, to give assurances to the plantation owners that their preaching would not lead to this undesirable outcome. Indeed, many missionaries took great pains to construct catechisms specifically designed to reinforce the slave's accommodation to his/her servile status by emphasizing and privileging those biblical texts that seemed to condone slavery and admonish slaves into obedience. Paul's letters were readily put to this purpose but that strategy backfired because there is something else happening in Paul's corpus that subverted the slave master's hermeneutic. Moreover, since a significant number of slaves attended the same church services as their masters they were able to hear and develop their own hermeneutic regarding a broader range of texts than those that were merely designed to admonish them into obedience. This was especially the case in the early nineteenth century during the Second Great Awakening when large numbers of African Americans were exposed to the Gospel. Regardless of the ethical teachings the missionaries tried to impose on the minds of their black converts, those teachings had to be based on the basic belief in the vicarious nature of Jesus death and resurrection and its efficacy for their salvation. This belief was encouraged through the telling of the story and not through the presentation of theological doctrines. The images that they received through these modes of communication became material they used to interpret and give meaning to the relentlessness of their toil, degradation, and death.

There was no rational answer to the questions that must have loomed large in their collective consciousness/unconsciousness. These were theodicy questions as to why they had to suffer? Who ordained it? Was it deserved? With this as one of their ultimate concerns they fixed their attention on the image of God choosing to enter into the very depths of their tragic condition to share their fate

that was crucifixion. It was not an answer to the great theodicy question at the rational level but it was a balm and consolation at the ontological level. They perceived in Christ's Passion that he had been martyred for them by becoming like them. His crucifixion mirrored their reality. Hence Jesus the Christ became the one sung about as "My Lord" not "the Lord." A white informant described the sermon he heard a black minister preach behind Union lines during the Civil War:

> He spoke of the "rugged wood of the cross," whereunto the Savior was nailed; and, after describing that scene with such power as I have ever known an orator to exhibit, he reached the climax, when he pictured the earthquake which rent the veil of the temple, with this extremely beautiful expression: "And, my friends, the earth was unable to endure the tremendous sacrilege, and trembled" He held his rude audience with most perfect control; subdued them, excited them, and, in fact, did what he pleased with them (Raboteau, 1978, p. 237).

We can imagine the escaped slave who attended that revival later invoking the memory of that occasion and the content of the message through their spontaneous composition of the Spiritual we are discussing. There is no way for us to reconstruct how the song was composed but the relationship between the content of the sermon quoted above and the song's lyrics speaks to the organic relationship between the slave's: worship/conversion experience, religious imagination, and lyrical composition.

"Were you there?" is a detailed meditation on Jesus' death. It asks, "Were you there when they nailed him to the cross?" It asks, "Were you there when they pierced him in the side?" It asks, "Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?" and between each of these inquiries we hear the refrain, "O sometimes it makes me want to tremble, tremble, tremble; were you there when they crucified my Lord?" One reason they trembled because was because what they were contemplating was horrific and terrible! And they trembled because the crucifixion mirrored their historical experience. They trembled because they must have intuited the scandal of what their religious imagination allowed them to witness—its offensive nature: the Messiah dying as an outcast like them. This perception was an integral part of the slave's conversion experience.

During conversion slaves often heard God's voice telling them that they were free. While still under the trance induced by the conversion experience would exclaim the phrase made popular to a wider American audience by Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement: "Free at last, I am free at last, thank God Almighty I am free at last." Mechal Sobel, in *Trablin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, writes that the spiritual freedom the slaves received through their conversion experiences became something that was rooted in the very core of their being and formed the center of their new identity that enabled them to resist dehumanization. They understood this freedom to be something of which could be neither deprived nor granted by their masters. It was a gift of God who was the ultimate source of human value and worth. Conversion meant being "struck

dead;" to die to their old sinful self so that the true self or "little me" could be born and obtain everlasting life. This spiritual—dare we say, ontological—freedom was what all other modes of freedom were grounded. Let us say, they experienced freedom as an eschatological reality. As early as 1787 the slave poet Jupiter Hammon wrote: "But this, [physical liberty] my dear brethren, is by no means the greatest thing we have to be concerned about. Getting our liberty in this world is nothing to our having the liberty of the children of God (Sobel, 1988, p. 117)."

Sobel cautions us against thinking that Hammon and others who wrote in that manner were disinterested in physical freedom. Quite the contrary, "they did yearn for freedom and, in fact, believed it would establish congruence between their inner and outer states. In other words, Christian freedom of soul made them certain that they were worthy of physical freedom" (Sobel, 1988, p. 217). What we can gather from Sobel's remarks is that in order for the slave to have been able to exercise agency—survive, resist, and revolt—there need to be an agent. That agent or self had to somehow be the product of something other than the system responsible for its oppression. Through their conversion slaves were able to acquire being and overcome the constant threat of non-being by being grounded in what Paul Tillich called the Ground of Being. The slaves once invested with being, self, and agency were able to struggle—which is to say, exercise freedom within the realm of un-freedom while deriving strength in weakness from the multivalent and paradoxical symbol of the cross. The slave's experience of Jesus' crucifixion gave them the courage and hope to pay the cost for the freedom which they possessed spiritually and sought physically—their crucifixion. One Spiritual, "O Freedom," clearly expresses this conviction:

> O freedom, O freedom, O freedom over me,
> And before I'll be a slave I'll be buried in my grave,
> And go home to my Lord and be free!

But after they were freed from slavery African Americans continued to experience crucifixion and one form it took was lynching. Almost three thousand and five hundred African Americans were lynched between the years 1882 and 1968. When blacks were lynched the victim was not just hung—he or she was brutalized; if male castrated; hung and then burned. Then after it all was over, the perpetrators of this form of violence very often boasted and glorified their dastardly deeds through postcards which showed them posing before the lifeless victim. In other words, lynching was a cultural phenomenon in the United States. Few leaders of the white political, cultural, social, or religious establishments were heard to speak out against the excessiveness of the white on black violence when these lynching were taking place. Young African American children growing up in Atlanta, Georgia were warned by their elders not to stray near the vicinity of Stone Mountain because "they have a rope hanging from every tree." What Billy Holiday sang about in the song "Strange Fruit" was not some imaginary nightmare but an

ever present threat that hang like a pall over the heads of all African Americans, both young and old, male and female.

> Southern trees bear strange fruit
> Blood on the leaves
> Blood at the root
> Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
>
> Composed by Abel Meeropol (A.K.A. Lewis Allan)

One of the more well known lynching incidents was of Emmett Louis Till– a youth who was brutally beaten and lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman. His body was so deformed from the beating that the undertakers wanted to have a closed casket. But Emmett's mother said something to the effect, "No I want America to see what they did." Photographs of Emmett Till's open casket appeared across the country and served to galvanize protest led by the NAACP, The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and so forth.

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" is a rhetorical question that really said to white America that you already are there. Christ is present in the people you work to death, rape, whip, and lynch. The crucifixion is taking place right before your eyes, in your own time, through the system of racial exploitation that you uphold. However, white America was prevented from contemplating Christ's crucifixion with the same seriousness and intensity of African American Christians because it participated in this evil. For the slave the crucifixion, with all its horror, was a central focus of their theological gaze and it remains so for most African Americans in Christian churches today.

CONCLUSION

Christ's Passion does not signify in the African American religious imagination the justification of either despair or resignation in the face of evil and oppression but rather the possibility of ultimate triumph and victory over their seeming invincibility. Seen through the eyes of the African American faith experience, the soul and the community in which it is situated will not, in the final moment, be defeated by these forces of negativity and death. God has entered into life's tragic dimension to suffer and die with us so that we might receive healing and life through his sacrifice. Christ's Passion has been interpreted in the African American faith tradition as God's protest against evil. In Christ's Passion African Americans have seen not only God's giving of his/her son but God's emptying of him/herself to take on the scandalous form of a slave (Philippians). By entering into this abyss of black suffering and death, Christ shows a way of not only surviving but provides, also the ontological basis for resistance and rebellion. The ethos of this black faith experience is expressed in the hymn, "Lift Every Voice," which has also been appropriately named "The Negro

National Anthem:"

> Lift every voice and sing
> Till earth and heaven ring,
> Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
> Let our rejoicing rise
> High as the listening skies,
> Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
> Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
> Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,
> Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
> Let us march on till victory is won.
>
> We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
> We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
> Out from the gloomy past,
> Till now we stand at last
> Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.
>
> God of our weary years,
> God of our silent tears,
> Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
> Thou who has by Thy might
> Led us into the light,
> Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

The people who were there when Jesus was crucified are the same people that are able to lift their voices and sing; the people who were there when Jesus was crucified are the same people who are able to keep on journeying down freedom's stony road; the people who were there when Jesus was crucified—because they too were being crucified—are the same people who, treading the blood of the slaughtered can sing a new song of faith and hope.

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