

A Black Theology of Divine Violence

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ABSTRACT

This paper claims that the black church community had a well-articulated theology which included a prominent place for a Black Theology of Divine Violence. The investigation of the early Black historical narration including the spirituals, abolitionist writings and oral narratives reveal that Black Christians advocated and used violence as a necessary action for the achievement of black liberation. Black Christians did not understand the use of violence as being antithetical to the Theological Ethical norms of Christian Love. They testified, sang and wrote about the presence of the Divine in their violent actions for freedom. This fact has been overshadowed by the nonviolent strategy of Martin L. King, Jr. and the Civil Right movement. The position of this paper is that King's theology made a virtue out of a necessity. It understands nonviolent theological ethics as a strategy rather than the only ethical response to Black suffering.

BLACK FERTILE CRESCENT THEOLOGY

A methodological problem with Black Theology is that it is not Black enough. However, as Malcolm X noted; "There was Black History before Slavery." This is also true of Black Theology. This understanding has led many theologians to utilize the religious thought found in the Black cultures of the West African Cosmos, However, even more importantly the religion and philosophy of Ancient Black Classical cultures has been ignored. Therefore, a Black Theology worthy of the name must have a methodological grounding in the sacred writings of the cultures of Ancient Black People: the Egyptian-Kimetic (Land of the Blacks) and Sumerian-Ug sag giga (The Black Headed People). These two cultures are the anchors of what I call "The Black Fertile Crescent. Egypt to the West and South, the Nile River Valley Culture, and Sumer to the north and West, the Tigris and Euphrates Valley Culture. These two cultures produced the foundational theological concepts and ethical warrants for the building of Western Religion and Culture. This is not an Afrocentric claim, but a historical claim. Despite the current racial theory in which Blackness is seen as a response to Whiteness, it is a historical fact these Black Classical cultures proudly claimed their Black skinned identity. Their Blackness was not a reaction to Whiteness, it was a sui generis description based on their God given skin color which differentiated them from other neighboring people. It was a mark that signified their exalted position as the receptacles for Divine Revelation. These were not "color blind" people. They felt no necessity to pretend that they were colorless people. They treated themselves and others on the basis of their divinely revealed theological ethical principles that recognized difference as a part of the natural order without resorting to hatred or disdain based on skin color.

Ancient Black Sources and A Black Theology of Divine Violence

Unlike what you learned in Christian Churches, the Black cultures of the Fertile Crescent provided a template for the theology and ethics that would become the foundation of Western Religions, this included a theological ethic of Divine Violence. The sacred narratives of these cultures had highly developed theological and ethical understandings. They were the first cultures to develop written moral Codes. Their moral codes reveal that the Divine responds with violence to punish the agents of unjust violence against others. The sacred stories of Egypt as found in the

depiction of Isis, Osiris, and Horus in which Horus, the Son of God, violently defeats his evil uncle Set, the killer of his Father, Osiris is the most prominent example of a Black Theology of Divine Justice. The final judgement scene in which the Dead are judged which will result in either the bliss of eternal life for loving and loyal behavior; or punishment consisting of a violent annihilation for unjust and feckless behavior laid the template for ideas of divine justice, immortality and the importance of doing no harm. These stories are later elaborated by the early Christian Church to depict the Great Throne Judgement in which those who lived a life without love are annihilated.

The story of the Great Flood as found in the Sumerian writings presaged the Noah story in which God justly destroys a wicked people by rain due to their development of a culture of unjust violence. It is telling that early Black Christians in America adopted that story and made it into a storied song, but as they were wont to do, they elaborated it by adding a fiery ending which was not a part of the Noah passage in Genesis; “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, “No more water but the fire next time.” In this way they collapsed the ancient divine violence of God in ancient times with the Divine violence that will be meted out against the agents of violence in the World to come.

HEBREW AND CHRISTIAN SACRED WRITINGS

It is beyond doubt and universally accepted that the sacred writings of Western Religions understand God as a Violent Deity who punishes unjust violence with violence. The attempt to distinguish Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, from The God of Jesus in the New Testament, requires hermeneutical gymnastics of the highest proportions and finds its history in Christian Anti-Semitism. The evidence of scripture and practice clearly contradicts such an attempt.

When it comes to a divine theology of divine violence from a Christian perspective it is clear that Jesus’ use of violent imagery and actions (a King who prepares for War, the Sower whose seed dies, Lazarus and Abraham who watch the Rich Man suffer; Cursing of the Fig Tree; Prophecy about the destruction of this age like that of Sodom and Gomorrah; Take up your swords in the passion narrative). Jesus’s use of violence in the Temple; the imagery of Jesus returning in violent destruction of the enemies of God are overwhelmingly conclusive of Divine Violence in the life and practice of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Sermon on the Mount has become the major scriptural source for this philosophy though New Testament scholars have long accepted that this scripture passage (including Rudolf Bultmann) represents an admirable, but unrealizable, ethical ideal that could not be fully realized in a world which belongs to Satan and not to God. The Augustinian/Lutheran trajectory of the Two Kingdom theology of Humanity vs. God of orthodox Christian doctrine calls for a this worldly ethic that includes the use of violence as a necessary instrument for restraining the oppressive actions of humankind. This theological interpretation allowed for the development of Jus War theory which forms the basis for the approved morally accepted use of violence in warfare that is relatively just and causes the least harm.

Those who would argue otherwise are guilty of the Nietzschean sin of “*ressentiment*” by which necessity became a virtue for the early Christian Church. It also destroys the historical actuality of Jesus as apocalyptic prophet who will return in judgement to visit divine violence upon the Oppressor of the poor and needy. In the words of one New Testament Scholar:

Two thousand years later, the Christ of Paul’s creation has utterly subsumed the Jesus of history. The memory of the revolutionary zealot who walked across Galilee gathering an army of disciples with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth, the magnetic preacher who defied the authority of the Temple priesthood in Jerusalem, the radical Jewish nationalist who challenged the Roman occupation and lost, has been almost completely lost to history. That is a shame. Because the one thing any comprehensive study of the historical Jesus should hopefully reveal is that Jesus of Nazareth—Jesus the man—is every bit as compelling, charismatic, and

praiseworthy as Jesus the Christ. He is, in short, someone worth believing in.

Aslan, Reza, Zealot The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth, random House, NY 2013

For our purposes, even Paul who obscured the Jesus of History, is certain of the coming violent Return of Jesus, the Apocalyptic Messiah (Christ) who would return in glory with His Heavenly Angelic Warriors, but with the intension of saving the Church and not just the Anton of Israel. Paul's apologia preserved the possibility of the longevity of the Jesus movement by aligning it theologically with the Egyptian Mystery Religion of Isis with an apocalyptic twist. The Mother Church of Jerusalem, led by James, the Brother of Jesus, was destroyed by the Roman-Jewish War of 66-70 C.E., leaving the theology of Christian accommodation in the hands of the Roman Citizen; Paul. The blaring contradiction of so called early Church Christian Pacifism is incompatible with its earliest teaching of judgement and resistance to Roman imperialism. This is the theme of the Divinely ordained violent destruction of Rome by the Bronze skinned, wooly haired Messiah as elucidated in the Early Christian scriptures as written by of St. John, The Revelator.

A BLACK AMERICAN THEOLOGY OF DIVINE VIOLENCE

The early Black Christian church was consistent in its articulation of a theology of Divine Violence. It's sacred narration as found in its Spirituals bear overwhelming testimony to that theological understanding. In the North, the abolitionist movement made sure that the Black Slave was imaged as a compliant, docile, servile victim of White oppression in order to elicit support of the ending of slavery. The Slave narratives of escaped Blacks which were promoted by these abolitionists, like Harriet Beecher Stowe in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" seldom mentioned any of the many acts of violent Black resistance to slavery's many evils. White terror of the possible violence of freed Blacks were heightened by the successful Haitian revolution, and the slave insurrections of Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser, both Black Christian preachers, made it a necessity to obscure the slave's belief and practice of The Black Theology of Divine Violence. They were successful in their pandering to White sentimentality, Lincoln credited Stowe with creating the necessity for the Civil War, but at the cost of the historical reality of a Black Theological Ethic of Divine Violence.

The narrative of Frederick Douglass, the leading Black Abolitionist of his day, was one of the few Slave Narrators that depicted violent resistance to slavery. Even attempts by White Christian Pacifists, like William Lloyd Garrison, could not convince Black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth to abandon their theological understanding of a Christian God of Divine Violence. In Fanon like fashion a hundred years before Fanon (Wretched of the Earth) Douglass articulates the spiritual, psychological and practical value of violent resistance in his *Narrative*.

"This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me."

The Spirituals

The necessity for this theological compromise was not a part of the Theology of the Black Captives. This can be readily seen in the most popular Negro Spirituals which are based on a

Theology of Divine Violence. The Black slaves understood the difference between the unjust use of violence, something that they were subject to for every day of their lives, as compared to the just use of violence that was deserved by their Slave masters and to any who opposed their freedom.

There is no doubt that most Christians have heard and sung these songs which confirm the Theology of Divine Violence. These songs were so explicit in their lyrics that it would be impossible to ignore the theological themes of divine retribution. are those with violent themes like: Joshua Fought the Battle; Go Down Moses and Mary Don't You Weep.

Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho

Joshua ought the battle of Jericho.
Joshua fought the battle of Jericho
And the walls came tumbling down
You can talk about your man of Gideon
You can talk about your man of Saul
But it was good old Joshua
When the Walls come tumbling down

Go Down Moses

Go Down Moses
Way down in Egypt's Land
Tell Ole Pharaoh
To let my people go
Or else I'll strike your first born dead

Oh Mary Don't You Weep

Oh Mary Don't you weep don't you mourn
Pharaoh's army got drowned
Oh Mary Don't you weep.

SLAVE INSURRECTIONS

The violent resistance to slavery by Black Christians are innumerable; ranging from the several hundred to the thousands. (see Aptheker, Genovese). The slave testimonies of former captives found in the recordings of the Smithsonian in vivid accounts of violent resistance by Black women as well. Harriet Tubman (Black Moses) was paradigmatic and not alone in the resistance to the violence of slavery as they responded with violence of their own.

One day when an old woman was plowing in the field, an overseer came by and reprimanded he for being so slow.—she gave him some back talk, he took out a long closely woven whip and lashed her severely. The woman became sore and took her hoe and chopped him right across his head, and, child, you should have seen how she chopped this man to a bloody death.

Early Hurt had an overseer, named Sanders. He tied my sister Crecie to a stump to whip her. Crecie was stout and heavy. She was a grown young woman and big and strong. Sanders had two big dogs with him I case he had trouble with anyone. When he started laying that lash on Crecie's back, she pulled up that stump and whipped him and the dogs both. Old Early Hurt came up and whipped her hissself. Said, "Oh, you're too bad for the overseer to whip, huh?"

NONVIOLENCE AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Due to the tremendous influence of the philosophy of nonviolence as it was practiced and stated by Martin Luther King, Jr. there has been a virtual erasure of the Black Theology of Divine Violence. However, I would suggest that, like the early church, a philosophy of nonviolence was due to necessity and not virtue. It is no accident that Nietzsche's critique of Christianity was the one philosophy that troubled Martin Luther King Jr. the most. (Pilgrimage to Nonviolence) A philosophical bridge that he was unable to cross. For in reality King and his followers showed little or no adherence to a theology of nonviolence that was a part of Gandhian Ahimsa teaching and practice. These Civil rights leaders left behind them a swath of innumerable slaughtered chickens, pigs and cows to ever make the claim that they were dedicated to a total philosophy of non-violence. The culinary appetites of King, Abernathy and Young would not bear witness to their view of the sacredness of all life. All kidding aside, I mention this because it is apparent that King's admiration for the nonviolent philosophy of Gandhi was never integrated into a theological perspective that governed the totality of his life. King's everyday actions, unlike that of Gandhi's practice, was incompatible with a repudiation of violence against all sentient beings. For a practicing disciple of ahimsa, all of life is to be treated in a nonviolent fashion, not just when it came to the tactics of social protest.

Even the calculated strategy meant to produce violent outbursts from their opponents is antithetical to the spirit of a philosophy of nonviolence. However, the leadership of SCLC realized that their cause was best served when their opponents could be instigated into committing harm through acts of violence against protesters, (Eyes on the Prize) so much so that they were not above placing children in harm's way. (The Children's March) Once their opponents realized that displays of public violence, as recorded by TV cameras, strategy only increased sympathy for the protester's cause, they stopped the public beatings, and instead filled their jails to overflow with young protesters and even refused to incarcerate King lest his publicly reported jailing evoke the sympathy of the nation.

Other authors have argued that it was the threat of violence as symbolically represented by Malcolm X, and made real by the rebellions of the 60's in many major urban areas, that were as necessary as the nonviolent protests that led to Civil Rights legislation of the 1960's. Persons like Malcolm X realized that it was the synergy of violence and nonviolence, "By All Means Necessary," that resulted in social change for Blacks. My personal experiences in this turbulent time would lead me to agree with this perspective. I don't think it was coincidental that the Federal government and educational institutions began to heavily recruit young Black men for college. We understood this as a means to siphon off the best and brightest who would otherwise become a part of the more militant Black groups. This was also seen in the demise of the use of live rifle training programs for Army High School ROTC units, of which I was a part, that were meant to make its members proficient sharpshooters, were terminated by Army policy in the 60's. We learned to strip, clean and reassemble our M1 rifles, but were never allowed to test our weapons or develop and hone shooting skills on the firing range. Yet, upon High School graduation, Officers in those programs were issued Brevet Commissions, as officers in the National Guard, if we were needed to quell the civil unrest caused by our Black Brothers and sisters in the streets.

There is no doubt that by 1968, the year of King's death, that most Black young people had grown disaffected with the philosophy of nonviolent resistance and were becoming more dedicated to a philosophy that included the use of violence. It is ironic that most Black church leaders espoused a theology of Divine nonviolence when it came to domestic social actions, but served on Draft Boards and encouraged their young members to fight in the Vietnam War. It is doubly ironic that these same pastors did not support Dr. King's efforts at nonviolent resistance and forcefully removed him and his Progressive associates from the major Black Baptist denominational convention.

This now nearly universal acceptance by Black Churches that the God of Jesus Christ espoused nonviolence is contradicted by these clergy's support for the many wars of imperialism that have

been engaged in by the United States, including the recent wars in the Middle East. It is absurd and almost pathetic and heartbreaking to see a Black Christian President singing Amazing Grace and calling for nonviolence in a memorial service in South Carolina after the murder of defenseless senior Black women and men in their own Church by a White supremacist. This scene reaches the level of Tragic proportions when one realizes that this same Nobel Peace Prize winning President devised a drone strategy that has killed thousands of innocent civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq, approved the death of American Citizens by Drone, and celebrated the violent death of America's most wanted enemy, Osama Bin Laden. An ending worthy of Creon in Antigone.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that it is in keeping with a Black Cultural Hermeneutic of Being as found in the sacred narratives of Black people; that A Black Theology of Divine Violence exists within the Tradition of Black Spirituality. This theological ethic of violent resistance is the fitting response to unjust violence that may result in harm to oneself, family and community. The adoption of nonviolence as the agreed upon theological ethic for the Black community has little historical evidence or theological warrants when examining Divine Violence as found in ancient Black writings, Western Scriptures and early Black American theology. It is interesting that my experience in teaching a Bible study for seniors, primarily women in a Black Methodist Church was my first glimpse of this theological ethic as they recounted their life in the rural South and urban North. Though we were studying the writings of Martin Luther King Jr. In "Strength To Love" a collection of King's sermons; these Black women made it known that they held a theological interpretation more akin to Malcolm X than Martin King in their understanding of the divinely justified use of violence. I believe that they represent a silenced majority of African American Christians who believe that the Christian God sanctions the use of violence to end unjust violence in this world. They only lack the Voice and opportunity to express their beliefs. Rev. Dr. Don Henry Matthews speaks for them. I thank you.

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