Black religion: the question of legitimacy

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ABSTRACT

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Black Religion: The Question of Legitimacy

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The primary intent of this thesis is to show the transition of black religion from the earliest times, when black slaves touched American soil, until the present time. An attempt was made to show how this religion has filled the objectives and needs of black people.

One phase of the religion was dealt with by showing how denominationalism reveals itself as the story of the religiously neglected poor, who fashion a new type of Christianity which corresponds to their distinctive needs and, who rise in the economic scale under the influence of religious discipline. The second phase of this religion was dealt with in terms of contemporary black theologians whose religion is one which deals with the liberation of black people from white oppression or rather white religion.

The main sources of information were theological reference materials. The scope of these materials ranged from books, magazine articles, pamphlets and journals. Interviews with theologians at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia were also utilized.
BLACK RELIGION:
THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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BY
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

The first distinctive institution which the Negro has developed in this country is the Negro church, and it is in connection with this religion that we may expect to find, if anywhere, the indications of a distinctive Afro-American culture.

The actual conditions under which the African slaves were connected to Christianity have never been adequately investigated. It is known, in a general way, that there was considerable opposition to admitting the Negro into the church because it was feared that it would impair the master's title to the slaves. It is also known that the house servants were very early admitted to churches and that in many cases, masters went to considerable pains to instruct those servants who shared with them the intimacy of the household.

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was founded in 1701, and the efforts to christianize were carried on with a great deal of zeal and with some success. It was not, however, until the coming of the new, free, and evangelistic types of Christianity, the Baptists
and the Methodists, that the masses of the Negro people, i.e., the plantation Negroes, found a form of Christianity that they could make their own.

How early and completely did this make the religion of these two denominations they won many be gathered from some of the contemporary writings which record the founding of the first Negro church in America. The first Negro Church in Jamaica was founded by George Liele shortly after the close of the Revolutionary War. George Liele had been a slave in Savannah, Georgia, but his master, who seems to have been a Tory, emigrated to Jamaica after the war. The following excerpt from a missionary report indicated the way in which Liele entered upon his self-appointed ministry.

Being "called by grace" himself, George began to discover his love to other Negroes, on the same plantation with himself, by reading hymns among them, encouraging them to sing, and sometimes by explaining the most striking parts of them.¹

Andrew Bryon in Savannah was one of Liele's congregation. He was converted, according to the contemporary record, by Liele's exposition of the text "you must be born again!" About eight months after Liele's departure, Bryon began to preach to a Negro congregation, "with a few whites." Whites objected to the meetings and Bryon and some of his associates were arrested and whipped. But he "rejoiced in his whippings"

¹Letters showing the Rise and Progress of the Early Negro Churches of Georgia and the West Indies, Journal of Negro History I (1916), p. 70.
and holding up his head declared, "He would freely suffer death for the cause of Jesus Christ." Bryon's master interceded for him and "was most affected and grieved," at his punishment. He gave Bryon and his followers a barn to worship in after Chief Justice Osborn had given them their liberty. This was the origin of what was probably the first Negro church in America.

George Liele and Andrew Bryon were probably not exceptional men, even for their day. The Reverend James Cook wrote of Bryon: "His gifts are small but he is clear in the grand doctrines of the Gospel. I believe him truly pious and he has the instrument of doing more among the poor slaves than all the learned doctors in America."^1

The significant point is that, with the appearance of these men, Negroes in America ceased to be a mission people. From this time on the movement went on its own momentum, more and more largely under the leadership of the Negro leaders. Little Negro congregations, under the leadership of Negro preachers, sprang up wherever they were tolerated. Often they were suppressed, more often they were privately encouraged. Not infrequently they met in secret.^2

In 1787 Richard Allen and Absalom Jones had formed in Philadelphia the Free African Society, out of which four years later in 1790 arose the first separate denominational

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^1Journal of Negro History, I (1916), p. 70.

organization of Negroes, The African Methodist Episcopal Church. George Liele, Andrew Bryon, Richard Allen and other founders of the Negro church were men of some education as their letters and other writings show.\(^1\)

The religion of the Negroes of the plantation was then, as it is today, of a much more primitive sort. Furthermore, there were considerable differences in the cultural status of different regions of the South and these differences were reflected in the Negro churches.

**Review of Literature**

The attempt by blacks to construct a distinctively black theology has a strong thus-worldly existentialist cast. The idea of heaven is irrelevant for black theology.

The belief that 'Christian' theology is a theology of liberation is the theme of James H. Cone's book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. In this work the author relates the struggle for black liberation to the development of black theology in reaction to the indifference of white Christians to the plight of their fellow church members.\(^2\)

As Cone cites in another of his works, *In Search of a Black Christianity*, "Black theology is the only genuine manifestation of Christianity in America today. White theology

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\(^1\)Robert E. Park, "Education in its Relations to the Conflict and Fusion of Cultures," *Publication of the American Sociological Society*, XIII (1918), pp. 38-63.

is basically racist and non-Christian. If there is any contemporary meaning of the Antichrist, the white church seems to be a manifestation of it. It is the enemy of Christ." Cone's argument is that black theology should be a theology of revolution "whose sole purpose" is to apply the freeing power of the Gospel to black people under white oppression.¹

Albert B. Cleage, Jr.'s theme in his book, The Black Messiah, is that black nationalistic theology depicts the biblical Jews as black people and Jesus as a black messiah whose mission was to resurrect the nation of Israel. The Romans were ancient honkies, while Judas, the Pharisees, and the Sanhedrin were the counterpart to modern-day Uncle Toms. Jesus' function was to bring not peace but a sword—he was a revolutionary leader of an oppressed black people, not the savior of all mankind. With this ideology as a framework, Cleage maintains that the Negro Church is called upon to play a critical role today in uniting Afro-Americans into a black nation, and in the creation of a black revolution.²

Dr. Joseph R. Washington, author of Black Religion does not agree with the legitimacy of a separate black theology movement. His argument is that "if you mean by theology a cognitive body of knowledge and a means to intellectually and structurally understand it then I question if


there is a black theology. I tend not to think of theology as experience."¹

Statement of the Problem

Most of the studies of religion have employed the methodology of the social sciences; hardly any of the studies have come to terms with the specifically religious elements in the religion of black Americans.²

There are in fact two kinds of studies of religion: those arising from the social sciences, and an explicitly theological apologetic tradition. This limitation of methodological perspectives has led to a narrowness of understanding and the failure to perceive certain possibilities in the black community of America.³

Today, black churches of the United States have been frequently accused of excessive caution on civil rights--they are rapidly catching up with the secular advocates of Black Power.

A group of contemporary young blacks are laboriously writing a distinctive "black theology." Their theology is concerned with a theology of black liberation, the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from

¹Cone, op. cit., pp. 57-58.
³Ibid., p. 55.
white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both black and white people. The theologians concerned with in this research will be Joseph R. Washington, James H. Cone, and Albert B. Cleage. The problem involved in this study is to determine whether there is legitimacy in contemporary black religion.

**Methodology**

The major source of research methods to be employed in this study will be theological reference materials. The scope of these materials will range from books to pamphlets, and interviews with theologians at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia.
CHAPTER II

DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION

One phase of the history of denominationalism reveals itself as the story of the religiously neglected poor, who fashion a new type of Christianity which corresponds to their distinctive needs and, who rise in the economic scale under the influence of religious discipline. The context of this chapter is threefold: 1) it deals briefly with the Durkheimian theory involved in religion; 2) it discusses the churches of the disinherited, and 3) it reveals some aspects of denominationalism and the color line.

Emile Durkheim embarked on an analysis of religious behavior. A basic distinction in the analysis of religion is the difference between the sacred and the secular, between what is holy and what is profane. Religion is concerned with sacred or holy things. When a person is conscious of his relationship to the sacred he is, at that moment of time, freed from the bondage of personal wants and sectional interests. The essence of social life is the interaction of people's minds. When there is close relationship between human minds, individual selves are subordinated. Sometimes, indeed there is a peculiar intensity in the interaction which
brings forth new sentiments, sentiments which possess a stronger power than purely individual sentiments possess, for these are group ones and represent a collective ferment of intense social communion out of which something new may emerge, something creative, indeed a new ideal. Thus are values created. Durkheim cites a number of historical instances. The growth of scholasticism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe sprang from the meeting and intense interaction of scholars gathered together in Paris. The Renaissance and the Reformation were other instances, the French Revolution in the eighteenth century and the rise of socialist movements in the nineteenth century: all these he argues were cases of creative syntheses. In such times new ideals are born, sectional interests are subdued and forgotten for a while and the ideal becomes real. Of course, the occasion passes and life becomes humdrum again, so it comes about that men wish to revive the memory, for faith in the new ideal has to be repeatedly restored, and the experience has to be relived. Hence ceremonies, religious events and feasts, public occasions and speeches, plays and pageantry are utilized; they are "minor versions of the great creative movement." And Durkheim goes on: "Through the very awareness of itself society forces the individual to transcend himself and to participate in a higher form of life. A society cannot be constituted without creating
ideals." ¹ It is interesting to note in passing how far removed from his original position Durkheim is at this point.

In his later intellectual period Durkheim developed these ideas further, focusing his interest on religious beliefs and practices. The reason for this is that he saw religion as a social matter. His mind was directed to answering the question: What is the origin of religion? He took for examination what he thought was the most primitive society on Earth, that of the Australian aboriginal. His reason for doing so was that the Totemic object among the Aruntas was connected not only with religion but also with clan membership. Thus the Australian aboriginal's clan takes the totem as its emblem, but the totem, being a religious or sacred object, inspires respect and awe, and especially is this true when the otherwise scattered parts of the clan come together periodically on a ceremonial occasion. It is then that an excitement is bred which lifts the individual out of himself. It is a minor case of a reality unseen.

Durkheim argued that the reality is in fact the social group itself. This in short is the burden of his famous work Les Formes elementaires de la vie religieuse (1912).²


materialistic one. If his assumptions about Australian totemic societies were partly mistaken, in that they are not the most primitive in their religious beliefs and practices, or in their clan organization, or for that matter in their representing an early stage in the evolution of mankind; nevertheless his work is impressive, both as a detailed secondary analysis based on other people's field work and in the generality of the hypotheses he discusses. Especially interesting is his analysis of the power exerted by symbolic objects. Of particular importance historically is the fillip he gave to the sociological study of religious behavior in terms of the social functions of religion. He began by examining values and it was a long journey before he was brought back again to the conscience collective—the body of common values which lies at the heart of human social existence, and which, for him, constituted the essence of society.

The Churches of the Disinherited

One phase of denominationalism is largely explicable by means of a modified economic interpretation of religious history; for the division of the church have been occasioned more frequently by the direct and indirect operation of economic factors than by the influence of any other major interest of man. Economic stratification is often responsible for maintaining divisions which were originally due to differences of another sort. Social history demonstrates how a racial class may retain its solidarity, and religious history
offers examples of churches which were originally racial in character but maintained their separateness under new conditions because the racial group developed into an economic entity. Some sects, whose origins are not so readily identifiable with economic movements, have persisted their separate character because of the economic status of their members and are distinguished from their sister denominations less by doctrine than by their wealth and the consequent conservation of ethics and thought.

The astute historian of social ethics of the churches, Ernest Troeltsch, once wrote: "The really creative, church-forming, religious movements are the work of lower strata." Here only can one find that union of unimpaired imagination, simplicity in emotional life, unreflective character of thought, spontaneity of energy and vehement force of need, out of which an unconditioned faith in a divine revelation, the naiveté of complete surrender and the intransigence of certitude can rise. Need upon the one hand and the absence of an all-relativizing culture of reflection on the other hand are at home only in these strata.¹

The religion of the untutored and economically disfranchised classes has distinct ethical and psychological characteristic relating to the needs of these groups. Emotional fervor is one common mark. Where the power of abstract thought

has not been highly developed and where inhibitions on emotional expression have not been set up by a system of polite conventions, religion must and will express itself in emotional terms. Under these circumstances spontaneity and energy of religious feeling rather than conformity to an abstract creed are regarded as the tests of religious genuineness. The formality of ritual is displaced in such groups by an informality which gives opportunity for the expression of emotional faith. An intellectually trained and liturgically minded clergy is rejected in favor of lay leaders who serve the emotional needs of this religion adequately and who, on the other hand, are not allied by culture and interest with those ruling classes whose superior manner of life is too obviously purchased at the expense of the poor.

Ethically, this type of religion bears a distinct character. The salvation which it seeks and sets forth is the salvation of the socially disinherited. The religion of the poor is characterized by the exaltation of the typical virtues of the class and by the apprehension under the influence of the gospel of the moral values present in its necessities. One finds here appreciation of the religious worth of solidarity and equality, of sympathy and mutual aid, of rigorous honesty in matters of debt, and the religious evaluation of simplicity of dress and manner, of the wisdom hidden to the wise and prudent but revealed to babes, of poverty of spirit, of humility and meekness. Simple and direct in its apprehension of the faith, the religion of the
poor shuns the relativizations of ethical and intellectual sophistication and by its fruits in conduct often demonstrates its moral and religious superiority.

Whenever Christianity has become the religion of the fortunate and cultured and has grown philosophical, abstract, formal, and ethically harmless in the process, the lower strata of society find themselves religiously expatriated by a faith which neither meets their psychological needs nor sets forth an appealing ethical ideal. In such a situation the right leader finds little difficulty in launching a new movement which will, as a rule, give rise to a new denomination. However, when the religious leader does not appear and religion remains bound in the forms of middle class culture, the secularization of the masses and the transfer of their religious fervor to secular movements, which hold some promise of salvation from the evils that affect them, is the probable result.

The development of the religion of the disinherited is illustrated not only by the history of various sects in Christianity but by the rise of that faith itself. It began as a religion of the poor, of those who had been denied a stake in contemporary civilization. It was not a socialist movement, as some have sought to show, but a religious revolution, centering in a mundane Paradise but in the cult of Christ. Yet it was addressed to the poor in the land.
Denominationalism and the Color Line

The social causes of schism have been obscured so frequently by theological rationalization that the frankness with which the color line has drawn in the church is unusual. No partisan maintains that the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, were divided from each other by hearsay or that the separation of the black from the white Baptists was occasioned by doctrinal disputes. In view of the similarity of the theology, ritual and organization of the separated groups any attempt at theological rationalization of the differences between them would probably have been vain. The lack of theological speculation among the Negroes may also have been responsible for the absence of efforts to interpret schism in religious terms. But, on the whole, the sufficient reason for the frankness with which the color line has been drawn in the church is the fact that race discrimination is so respectable an attitude in America that it could be accepted by the church without subterfuge of any sort.

Rationalization has been used to defend discrimination rather than to obscure it. The dogma which divides the racial churches is anthropological, not theological, in context. Whether the dogma of white superiority and black inferiority has been openly avowed or unconsciously accepted, the white churches have nevertheless taken it for granted and come to regard it as incompatible with the remainder of their beliefs.
At times, indeed, they have incorporated it in their popular theology and sought to provide a biblical basis for it, usually by means of a mythological interpretation of the curse of Ham and a corresponding mythological anthropology. More frequently they have received it as a simple dogma of nature, similar to the doctrine of sex.\(^1\) In both cases the assumption of superiority by one group—an assumption which became unquestioned social tradition—has been given the dignity of an impartial natural law and regarded as a self-evident truth. Just as the church accepted the doctrine of female inferiority and refused women the right to be ordained or even to participate in its government, so also it accepted the dogma of Negro inferiority and without compunction refused ecclesiastical equality to this race. The fact that in Christ there is neither male nor female has, of course, been recognized much more freely in the church than has the fact that in Him there can be neither white nor black. The church could not escape the duty of dealing with the relationship of men and women and of masters and slaves. But races can be isolated from each other and the race problem can be ignored. On the whole, however, the ideal of unity and equality has never been recognized in reality until the inferior group, whether women or slaves or a racial group, has asserted that equality and

compelled the church to translate its principle into practice.

It is true that the church has had its seasons of enthusiasm passed away and the church compromised its principles of brotherhood by dividing into religious societies of the rich and poor and of the nations. The racial schism is primarily a phenomenon of American religious life, but the color problem is not solely American. The rise of missionary churches in Asia and Africa has made it a world problem. The schism of the future, it may be, are more likely to be racial schism than economic division of the church.

The existence of the racial schism in America is one of the clearest facts in the whole mixed pattern of American denominationalism. Four great denominations, the National Baptist Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion and the colored Methodist Episcopal churches are purely Negro organizations. In addition to these major organizations there are in the United States a score of smaller all-black groups. These black denominations have a membership of more than 9,154,300. Most of the blacks who are members of denominations in which the white race predominates are separated into special conferences or districts while almost all of them are segregated into racial local churches. Only in a negligible number of instances are blacks members of churches with a mixed racial constituency.¹

This segregation of the races into racial denominations has not always prevailed. Prior to the Civil War—in the South at least but largely in the North also—white and black Christians worshipped together. They did not enjoy complete fellowship, it is true, but they participated in the same services and were members of the same denominations. Defenders of the old order are often able to draw a rather idyllic picture of the days before emancipation when "the two races mingled freely together, not on terms of social equality but in a very extended and constant social intercourse."¹ Domestic servants, if not plantation slaves, often shared with their masters and mistresses the ministrations of the same pastors and communed at the same Lord’s Table. The Anglican church was the leading denomination among the Southern masters and this church was officially very mindful of its duty toward the slaves, however inadequately its members may have practiced the ideals set forth by its bishops. As early as 1727 the bishop of London addressed a letter to masters and mistresses in the colonies urging upon them the Christian duty of providing for the religious instruction of their slaves.² Many of his colleagues and successors repeated and reinforced his counsels. The Society for the Propagation of


the Gospel in Foreign Parts, which was established in London in 1701, had the evangelization of Negroes and Indians as a special objective. It worked in the colonies through the agencies of the established church for the religious instruction of the slaves; it sent missionaries to them and supported Negro schools; it even purchased two Negro youths whom it educated that they in turn might become teachers of Negro children. "Thus," as the Proceedings stated, "the Society hath opened a door by which the light of the blessed gospel will speedily and abundantly pour in among the poor Negroes of Carolina." ¹

While the results of this missionary enterprise were not very great it is a noteworthy fact that Negroes who were baptized by the Episcopalian missionaries were brought into full membership with the church. The best known of these early missionaries, Reverend Samuel Thomas, reported in 1705 that on his quarterly visits to Goose Creek Parish in South Carolina he "always administered the Blessed Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the number of communicants were about thirty, of which one was a Christian Negro man." He observed also that twenty slaves came constantly to church. ² The same report indicated that a similar situation existed in neighboring parishes. Under the ministration of missionaries and friends Negroes began to attend church in such large numbers

¹Ibid., p. 552.
²Ibid., p. 197.
that they could not be accommodated and that in some congregations half of the attendants were Negroes. A report from Edenton, North Carolina a few years later contained the statement that "the blacks generally were induced to attend services at all these stations, where they behaved with great decorum."¹ In the Northern colonies similar conditions prevailed. The Reverend Mr. G. Ross reported from Philadelphia that as many as twelve adult Negroes had been baptized after examination before the congregation. At Newport more than one-hundred Negroes "constantly attended the Publick Worship."²

In some of the denominations especially the Episcopalians, the objective was to make arrangements for the employment of missionaries of their own church, so that masters and servants may worship together in unity of spirit and in the bond of peace. The Presbyterian Church, though less active than the Episcopalians in missionary work among the slaves, demonstrated a great interest in the subject and like the English church sought to foster patriarchal relations between masters and servants in religion and on the plantation. The General Assembly of 1854 commented on the increased zeal of its presbyteries in promoting the religious welfare of the slave population and noted that "in their houses of worship, provision at once special and liberal is made for the accommodation of the colored people, so that they may enjoy the


²Ibid., p. 17.
privileges of the sanctuary in common with the whites.\(^1\)

The Southern branch of the church continued this partriarchal interest after separation from the North, offering that "it is the peculiar mission of the Southern church to conserve the institution of slavery, and to make it a blessing both to master and slave." The resolution continued,

"We could not, if we would, yield up these four millions of mortal beings to the dictates of fanaticism and the menace of military power. We distinctly recognize the inscrutable power which brought this benighted people into our midst, and we shall feel that we have not discharged our solemn trust until we have used every effort to bring them under the saving influence of the gospel of Christ."\(^2\)

When emancipation came, the Southern church reaffirmed its historic policy by resolving "That whereas experience has invariably proved the advantages of the colored people and the white being united together in the worship of God, we see no reason why it should be otherwise now that they are freedmen and not slaves." It made provision for the organization of separate black churches, "should our colored friends think it best to separate from us," but resolved again in 1867, "that in the judgement of the Assembly it is highly expedient that there should be any ecclesiastical separation of the white and colored races; that such a measure would threaten evil to both races, and especially to the colored."\(^3\)

\(^1\)Minutes, p. 183, quoted in Baird's Digest, 1855, p. 828.

\(^2\)Minutes of 1864, p. 293, quoted in American Church History Series, Vol. XI, p. 429.

\(^3\)American Church Histories, Vol. XII, p. 379.
Interest in the Negro on the part of the Presbyterians as well as of the Episcopal church had been stimulated by the great revival and by the democratic doctrines of the Revolution. Both of these had fostered the sense of equality and pricked the conscience of the churches on the subject of slavery. It is intelligible, therefore, that the churches which were most strongly influenced by the revival and in closest touch with the radical wing of the democratic movement should have been readiest to welcome colored people as communicants. In the churches of the frontier the economic conditions of pioneers, the heritage of the social gospel received from European churches of the poor, and the absence of cultural or intellectual standards of church membership, combined with the religious message and missionary zeal to make the ideal of radical brotherhood somewhat more effective than it could be among the conservative ecclesiastical groups. The history of the relation of the Methodist church to the Negro is involved in the story of all the social changes through which that church passed in its progress from a sect of the disinherited to a middle-class denomination with many slaveholders among its members. As early as 1780, at the Baltimore Conference, provision was made for the meeting of Negro classes under white leadership. The testimony borne by the church against slavery and its efforts to exclude slaveholders from membership attracted the oppressed class and Methodism began to gain Negro members. In 1799 one-fifth
of its total membership was Negro.\(^1\)

It was the Baptist churches especially that the Negroes shared with the white men the fellowship of the gospel. The reasons for the close relationship in this church were the same as those which prevailed in the Methodist denomination with the attraction of free congregational polity. The latter feature permitted the Negroes to organize and govern their own churches and so provided them with a practical equality in religious affairs. The Episcopalian structure of the Methodist church did not offer equal opportunities. Baptists were readier to extend the privileges of ordination to colored preachers than were other denominations. In the early annals of the Negro church the names of distinguished black Baptist preachers outnumbers those of any other denomination. Occasionally the ministrations of these black preachers were accepted by white as well as by black Christians. Separate black churches were organized at an early date, yet prior to emancipation the great mass of the black Baptist membership was gathered in the white churches.

The religious unity of the two races was established and continued for a century for other reasons besides the ideal motives that the two races should be united in religion because of the brotherhood Jesus practiced and Paul preached. The white man's fear of black independence was as important

a factor in the matter as the white man's concern for the black man's soul. In many instances the Negro was tolerated in the master's church merely because such toleration was the lesser of two evils. The desirable good was the prevention of all contact with the spiritual and cultural influences of Christianity. The greater evil was the segregation of slaves into independent and uncontrolled organizations. From the beginning of the missionary enterprise among Africans many a master had been inimical to every effort at the conversion of his servants. The letter addressed in 1727 by the bishop to London to masters and mistresses answered various objections these had raised against religious propaganda among slaves. It had been argued that "the time to be allowed for instructing them would be an abatement from the profit of their labor," "that making them Christians only makes them less diligent and more ungovernable," and that by baptizing the slaves automatically destroys the owner's property rights in them. In the early period, special weight was attached to the last objection for it had been an unwritten law of Christendom that Christians might not hold fellow-believers as slaves. The slavery of the blacks had been defended, therefore, on the ground that he was a heathen. The slaveholder had felt the inconsistency of admitting an equality in religious relations which he was not willing to admit in civil life, and he had resisted the efforts of

1Mode, op. cit., p. 549ff.
missionaries to convert his servants as an attack on his property rights. ¹ Most of the churches, in order that they might gain access to the Negroes with their missionary message, readily gave up the unwritten law and conciliated their own and the slaveholder's conscience by arguing with the good bishop "that Christianity, and the embracing of the Gospel, does not make the least alteration in civil relations; but in all these respects, it continues persons just in the same state as it found them." The freedom which Christianity gives, is a freedom from the bondage of sin and satan, and from the dominion of men's lusts and passions and inordinate desires, but as to their outward condition, whatever that was before, whether bond or free, their being baptized and becoming Christians, makes no manner of change in it.²

Similar pronouncements were made on the part of other slaveholders by convincing them that the old scruples against holding Christians as slaves were false, but it did not overcome their opposition to the evangelization of the Negro.

Another objection loomed large in their minds. It was felt that the education which the slave might receive through the church and that the privileges which would be accorded to him as a Christian would only serve to reinforce his self-assertive tendencies, make him less docile, a burden-bearer and incline him to a revolutionary spirit. This fear was

¹Woodson, op. cit., p. 61.
²Mode, op. cit., p. 551.
greatly strengthened by the Haitian revolution and by various slave insurrections in the south, culminating in the Nat Turner uprising of 1831. It was true that many of the leaders of these insurrections were men who had received an inkling of the revolutionary doctrine of the New Testament and had learned what the claims and hopes of their humanity might be. Nat Turner had studied the Bible, and religious literature especially, and had started his insurrection in response to what he believed a divine communication. Black churches were the meeting places of some revolutionary groups and examples were not wanting of converted and educated Negroes who displayed the undesired, self-assertive spirit. The reaction of slaveholders and of the white race in general to such self-assertion expressed itself in attempts to deny to slaves all opportunity for contact with persons or ideas which might encourage in them the sense of human worth and the desire of freedom. Methodist and Baptist churches were especially suspect because of their early pronouncements against slavery. So the missionaries of these, but also of the other churches, were hard put to it to demonstrate to masters that the Christianization of slaves did not make them less but more slavish. Reverend C. C. Jones, leading Presbyterian advocate of Negro missions, sought to win the goodwill of slaveholders by maintaining that slaves well instructed in the Christian faith were less likely to develop revolutionary inclinations than the half-educated, such as Nat Turner.\(^1\)

\(^1\)Woodson, op. cit., p. 154.
Under the persuasion of such arguments and of their own conscience masters might yield a point and allow the slave to receive so much Christian instructions as would suffice for his salvation from Satan but not so much as might lead him to desire redemption from servitude. It was thought necessary, therefore, not only to prohibit the instruction of slaves in reading and writing but also to supervise their religious exercises carefully. This could best be done by requiring their attendance at the church of the master. Under the ministrations of a safe gospel preacher the slave might there receive a double insurance against the doom of eternal bondage and against the damnation of temporal license. In many instances, masters doubtless felt a genuine horror of the highly emotional, sometimes fantastic, religious practices of blacks left to themselves. They wished, for the good of the slave's soul, to have him inducted into the proprieties of a restrained faith and guarded against all infatuations. But that self-interest was largely responsible for the establishment of mixed churches is evident from the laws in the various Black Codes, especially from those passed after the Nat Turner insurrection. These often prohibited the assembling of more than five blacks, even for purposes of worship, without the permission of their masters, unless the services were in charge of some recognized white minister or observed by certain discreet and reputable persons.

Hence the association of white and black Christians in the various churches prior to the Civil War is scarcely
to be regarded as a demonstration of the Christian principle of brotherhood and equality. On the contrary the church relationship was in most instances designed to enlist the forces of religion in the task of preserving the civil relationship between masters and slaves. The former might indeed indulge their sense of virtue as they glanced at the galleries where their charges sat in due place and as they recalled the altruism of their interest in the souls of their servants.

The segregation of the races into distinct churches, was not, therefore, wholly a retrogressive step involving the decline of a previous fellowship. Sometimes it was a forward step from an association without equality, through independence, toward the ultimately desirable fellowship of equals.
CHAPTER III

CONTEMPORARY BLACK THEOLOGY

The Black Power Movement has been the most misunderstood phenomenon yet, especially by Black Leaders. First of all, Black people have always had a distinctive lifestyle that automatically made them different from other ethnic groups. But the significance of the Black Power Movement has been that Black people are now deciding that they will define what is valuable in Black Life. This is a very radical, even revolutionary, maneuver and has the explosive nature of a sensitivity session, a national sensitivity session. For what's involved at the bottom is a readjustment of the self-image of all people in this country.

If Black people are to define what a proper self-image is for themselves, then it means that whatever other people think of them is invalid. It also means that those ways of viewing the world sanctioned by the dominant institutions, both white and black, must be challenged. What this does is to threaten the very basis of power for all Black leaders. This is particularly threatening to Black preachers because their traditional roles have been those of telling Black people who they are, what their problems are, and what must be done to solve them. Also, the Black preachers' roles as interpreters of reality for Black people have necessarily
caused them to make compromises with the White Power Structure—compromises which meant, in effect, that the Black preachers, and only the Black preachers, are the direction-givers for black people.

This chapter deals with the new Black Theology of three contemporary theologians, James H. Cone, Joseph R. Washington, Jr. and Albert B. Cleage. Theirs is a theology which deals with the liberation of black people from white oppression or white religion. The views of these theologians will be presented separately.

According to James H. Cone, "Black Power" is an emotionally charged term which can evoke either angry rejection or passionate acceptance. He says some critics reject Black Power because to them it means blacks hating whites, while others describe it as the doctrine of Booker T. Washington in contemporary form. But the advocates of Black Power hail it as the only viable option for black people. For these persons Black Power means black people taking the dominant role in determining the black-white relationship in American society.

Cone believes that Black Power is the most important development in American life in this century and that there is a need to begin to analyze it from a theological perspective. In his work Black Theology and Black Power, an effort is made to investigate the concept of Black Power, placing primary emphasis on its relationship to Christianity, the Church, and contemporary American theology.
Cone believes that some religionists would consider Black power as the work of the Antichrist. Others would suggest that such a concept should be tolerated as an expression of Christian love to the misguided black brother. It is Cone's thesis that Black power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forebearance. It is, rather, Christ's central message to twentieth-century America. And unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to recapture 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. If the church is to remain faithful to its Lord, it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become prophetic, demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society.

Cone defines Black Theology as biblical theology seeking to create new value-perspectives for the oppressed; it is revolutionary theology. It is a theology which confronts white society as the racist Antichrist, communicating to the oppressor that nothing will be spared in the fight for freedom. It is this attitude which distinguishes it from white American theology and identifies it with the religionists of the Third World.

Black Theology believes that the problem of racism will not be solved through talk but through action. Therefore,
its task is to carve out a revolutionary theology based on relevant involvement in the world of racism.

The revolutionary attitude of Black Theology stems not only from the end of black people to defend themselves in the presence of white oppression, but also from its identity with biblical theology. Like biblical theology, it affirms the absolute sovereignty of God over his creation. This means that ultimate allegiance belongs only to God. Therefore, black people must be taught not to be disturbed about revolution or civil disobedience if the law violates God's purpose for man. The Christian man is obligated by a freedom grounded in the Creator to break all laws which contradict human dignity. Through disobedience to the state, he affirms his allegiance to God as Creator and his willingness to behave as if he believes it. Civil disobedience is a duty in a racist society.

The biblical emphasis on the freedom of man also means that one cannot allow another to define his existence. If the biblical imago Dei means anything, it certainly means that God has created man in such a way that man's own destiny is inseparable from his relation to the Creator. When man denies his freedom and the freedom of others, he denies God. To be for God by responding creatively to the imago Dei means that man cannot allow another to make him an it. It is this fact that makes black rebellion human and religious when black people affirm their freedom in God, they know that they cannot obey laws of oppression. By disobeying, they not only
say Yes to God but also to their own humanity and to the humanity of the white oppressor.

With reference to freedom in Christ, three assertions can be made about Black Power: First, the work of Christ is essentially a liberating work, directed toward and by the oppressed. Black Power embraces that very task. Second, Christ in liberating the wretched of the earth also liberates those responsible for the wretchedness. The oppressor is also freed of his peculiar demons. Black Power in shouting Yes to black humanness and No to white oppression is exorcizing demons on both sides of the conflict. Third, mature freedom is burdensome and risky, producing anxiety and conflict for free men and for the brittle structures they challenge. The call for Black Power is precisely the call to shoulder the burden of liberty in Christ, risking everything to live not as slaves but as free men.

The Reverend Albert B. Cleage of Detroit is one of the few black ministers who has embraced Black Power as a religious concept and has sought to reorient the church community on the basis of it. The following will be a discussion of points involved in his work, The Black Messiah. Cleage states that black people are oppressed because they are powerless and they are identifiable. They are oppressed by white people who have power and who control a system. It is necessary to understand then that a white person is part of this oppressive system, whether or not he engages in face-to-face brutality. Whites do not have to beat a black man
to death to be involved in the destruction of black people. Even in the church, whites enjoy a privileged position. A black minister has a certain limited area in which he can function. A white minister does not have to worry about the competition of a black preacher. The white preacher has a power position. It is difficult for white people to recognize this and accept it, because he who has power feels that his power has been divinely bestowed. He who is powerless also tends to feel that his powerlessness has been divinely bestowed as punishment for some mystical sin committed in the past.

Black people have only just begun the difficult struggle involved in facing the truths which are basic for our new position. First, and inescapable, is the simple fact that the white man is our enemy. This is important to the black church because a black theology must deal with this reality if it is going to be a theology which black people can accept. The white man is our enemy. To survive we must escape from powerlessness. To survive, we must reject the dream of integration which serves as the mechanism of our continuing enslavement.

 Everywhere today, black people are enraged and struggling to find a new black identity, struggling to escape from identification with white people, struggling for economic power, political power, and the power to control black communities. Liberal, Christian white people are the most threatened by the new emerging black man who wants to stand
alone, to be a person, to be a black man, and to think as a black man and to live in terms of his struggle for power. White Americans and black Americans are locked in a never-ending power struggle. This is the reality with which we all must live.

In the midst of a black revolution in which black people are struggling for power, slave Christianity no longer meets their needs. Slave Christianity is the Christianity that old master gave black people back on the plantation. Black people took this slave Christianity and made of it an instrument for survival. They put into it a vitality which the white man did not have in his own church. They believed fervently because they needed to believe; they needed a dream of escape in a world in which there was no real possibility of escape. They could conceive of no way to end their oppression so they used this slave theology as one way of maintaining sanity. The black church was also destroying black people. Black people suffered discrimination because they were black. And thus in church on Sunday morning the black slave preacher would say,

"God is concerned about each one of you. You think that all week he hasn't been looking at you, but he's been watching everything that the white man has been doing to you. God knows what white people have done to you and someday he is going to do for you what you can't do yourself. So get along with these white people as best as you can, because soon you are going to be taken up yonder to God and then you can sit at his right hand, and look down into hell where white people are roasting over hellfire."
That was a beautiful message with simple basic eloquence and power about it. Had it only been true! The preacher helped them to forget by telling them how beautiful it was going to be up there, and pretty soon they would be running up and down the aisles, shouting and screaming, and for the moment each individual escaped from his everyday problems. The church and slave Christianity has perpetuated our individualism. We don't have any sense of being a people fighting our problems together. We are waiting for God to save us individually. We do not really ask God to help us change the basic conditions under which black people live. This is the weakness of the black church. It is a survival instrument which destroyed the possibility of a united black liberation struggle.

As soon as black people began to see the world in which they lived realistically, they began to see white people as they really are--corrupt, brutal, and oppressive. When black people began to look at white people and see them as they were they said we can change this world ourselves, we don't have to wait for Jesus. That marked the beginning of a whole new way of life for black people. This new attitude could not fit into the slave church. The new black militant talked about people working together to change the black man's condition. The slave preacher still talked about sending individuals to heaven one by one. The two cannot mix. As soon as black people began to conceive of the possibility of changing the world, the absolute necessity for a new interpretation of the Bible and a new black theology became obvious. Now there were
other possible solutions. Black people could just leave the church, and that would be what many white people would want. But Christianity belongs to us. We are not going to give it up just because white people have messed it up.

So when we began to see that we could change the world we began to see that the church offered a broad institutional power base that could be useful in the black revolution. The only institution black people have is the church. All our money is tied up in religious structures and a good part of our trained personnel is tied up in religious institutions. We cannot just turn and leave it. We need it in the liberation struggle. Which means that we must change the church radically. We must make the church relevant to the black revolution.

The black church must go back to the beginning and seek to rediscover the original teaching of Jesus and the nation Israel. There is very little historicity in the gospels and in the New Testament. In the Old Testament we have a little history intermingled with much fantasy and myth. Instead of telling black people about escaping from the world and going home to God on high, the black church must begin to involve black people in the black liberation struggle, using the teachings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, and the Old Testament concept of nation to show black people how coming together with black pride and black power is basic to survival. The black church must become central in the black revolution. Jesus was a black Messiah
not in terms of his death on Calvary, but in terms of his dedication to the struggle of black people here on earth. In the black church sacraments can take on a new meaning. At the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit, Reverend Cleage baptizes into the nation. They die to the old Uncle Tom life. They die to old identification with white people. Reverend Cleage states that to be baptized into a black church must symbolize a complete rejection of the values of a hostile white world and a complete commitment to the struggle of black people. When the sacrament of Holy Communion is taken it should symbolize our total rededication to personal participation in the struggle of black people and total rededication to the black nation. The sacraments and rituals of the church then become for black people an intrinsic part of the revolutionary struggle.

A revolutionary black church must be a place to which black people come with pride, knowing that Jesus was black, that the nation Israel was black, and that we are following in the footsteps of a black Messiah. Even now we are restructuring the black church that it may become the foundation upon which we build the black Christian nationalist liberation struggle and the emerging black nation.

In many places today, as in Montgomery in 1956, the reality of Negro folk religion can be seen in its uniqueness, supported in part by Negro Protestants and Negro Christians but in full by Negroes of the most diversified persuasions. The common sufferings of segregation and discrimination is
the crucible out of which the folk religion was created in the past; it creates the unity and power of Negroes in the present and in an effort to tap his resource Negro ministers have been particularly guilty of equating the folk religion with "the Negro church." The folk religion is not an institutional one. It is a spirit which binds Negroes in a way they are not bound to other Americans because of their different histories. This is the theme of Joseph Washington, Jr. in his work Black Religion. Washington states that there are Negro religious institutions which developed out of the folk religion. And it is this historical folk religion which unites all blacks in a brotherhood which takes precedence over their individual patterns for the worship of God, or the lack thereof. The root of this folk religion is racial unity for freedom and equality. The folk religion holds in common with secularism a non-ecclesiastical affirmation, but the singularity of the folk or black religion is unique to the black folk, born as it was of slavery, and it ties them each to the other in terms of stress by racial bond which cuts across all other variables.

Social scientists have claimed that every strand of the African culture was eliminated from the black man. Among the African impress, which was not discharged from the black psyche, was religion and its concomitants of music, dance, song, rhythm, and worship of gods. Through the medium of music, dance, song on the beat of rhythm, religion survived the slave repression experience. The language and concepts
were changed but the dance and song survived and can be found today in the churches of black folks. There is in black religion an aliveness, intensity of joy and ecstasy, which is infectious because it is uninherited. In addition to the rhythmic beat, the religious service continues to be driven by antiphonal singing, as in African music, where the leader sings a lead line and it is answered by a congregation in chorus. Another important survival in the worship of black folk is the African dependency upon improvisation. In isolated areas of the rural South, the mixture of voodoo and other African fetish religion with Christianity can be found.\(^1\)

The special attraction which Baptists held for the slave was their form of baptism via immersion. The precedent of Christ here was important later on, but at first the fact that most of the religious of West Africa held the river spirits to be the most powerful of the gods, had a singular effect.

Insofar as Methodist and Baptist were the most popular religious forms for Africans, this appeal and response had to do with the emotionalism of their evangelism. There is an old African dictum that "the spirit will not descend without a song." In African religious rituals emotional frenzies were a dynamic and integral part. Ritual dances and songs and emotional frenzies of African religious "total letting

go" are among the lasting contributions to the religion of black folk in America.

The black preacher made superb use of African folk tales, parables, riddles, and proverbs, which were increasingly left behind for biblical stories and the American slave experience. The key to the black preacher was his ability to dramatize the sermon so that the people were pulled into direct response. His slow beginning, studdering out at key points for dramatic effect so that the people would feel forced to say it for him, the repetition all are demonstrated in black folk services.

The religion of black folk is a religion of ritual, drama, and "dialectical catharsis." The key to black folk religion is the power with which the black unconscious is stirred through ritualism. This religion of ritual power is not limited to churches or the sacred; it is best perceived as a real blend of the sacred and secula--that's where black religion is, for that is where life is.

We are in a transitional period in human history. This time between times is one in which the myths and symbols of the era past are powerless. Ours is a time of frustration, confusion, and uncertain direction. When one historical period ends it is to be expected that problems will become dominant over solutions, conflict over progress, disengagement over unity. Especially is this the case when a people are internally torn by a fundamental issue.

The death of the old order provides opportunity for
the birth of a new order with new myths and new symbols. Myths and symbols provide direction and meaning, and purpose and hope which men cannot live significantly without, nor can they create them at will. The only way to recognize a myth is by the power which emanates from it.

One new myth breaking forth out of the new age breaking in is Black Power. It is a movement of, from, and for black people. Black Power is in the interest of black people, it is the future of black people. The future of the black church and thus black religion is in relation to its support of Black Power or black people.

The task of the black church among black people is to meet their needs, to support and advance that which is in the ideal interest of them. To contribute, the black church must develop a theology of Black Power or black people. The future in and the future of black churches is in the area of theology rather than worship.

It is the theology of freedom, however, which Washington perceives to be the special province of the black church, a theology which has not been developed commensurate with the black experience. It is obvious that the very life of black people has been one concerned with freedom and that the very life of the church has been one concerned with dogmatism, arbitrariness, authoritarianism, and coercion. Black people are all concerned with freedom as a humanizing power. Freedom as a humanizing dimension is the very substance of black people which does not need to be searched out in some obscure
and special methodology; it is present in the hunger and thirst of the people. The hunger for freedom may not be realized through black churches if they continue to place their emphasis upon self-interest, tradition, narrow loyalties, ambition, status, security, and the quest for recognition. It does not matter whether or not advocates of Black Power who are not advocates of the black church agree with black churchmen and their development of a black theology of freedom. What does matter is that all understand that the question of freedom is not a question of intellectual abstraction but of the necessity of black people; whether they be Christians or not is quite beside the point. Black theologians must engage in the question of freedom to increase the status of black people.
Most of the studies of religion have employed the methodology of social sciences; hardly any of the studies have come to terms with the specifically religious elements in the religion of black Americans. The purpose of this study was to determine whether there is legitimacy in the religion of contemporary black theologians.

The purpose of Chapter II was threefold: 1) it dealt briefly with Emile Durkheim's sociological theory of religion; 2) the churches of the disinherited, and 3) aspects of denominationalism and the color line.

Chapter III dealt solely with the theses of the three black theologians involved in this study. It is my conclusion that their separate theories of black religion are legitimate as legitimate is defined in the definition of concepts in Chapter I. It can be concluded that James H. Cone is involved in a theology of black liberation from white oppression. Albert B. Cleage's theology deals with a black biblical interpretation. Joseph Washington's thesis involves a distinctiveness in black theology due to the inherent religious rituals of blacks.

The following is an excerpt from "The People of Saint
Simon Island" by John D. Reid. It attempts to give the direction of the religious expression which is becoming more useable in American society. We quote this because of the failure of "Black Theologians," on the whole, to identify the constellation of values in the black community and relate them to the religious experience. This is seen by some as suggesting that there is really no need for a Black Theology" in the sense of the traditional European theologians. What follows may be interpreted to suggest the failure of traditional European religions in the black community and raise questions as to the extent of change that will take place in the structures of basic institutions in the future.

Religion must always be seen within the context of the cultural historical situation in which any given group of people find themselves. Such a context would include the geographical location and the types of similarities which are culturally conditioned. The kind of economic, political, and social systems existing must also be taken under consideration and seen within the context of the cultural, historical situation.

In the foregoing discussion, an attempt has been made to state the context in which we must understand and interpret

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the religious life of Saint Simon Island, an all black community located approximately ten miles off the coast of South Georgia. However, it must be understood that such a context is not synonymous with what we would call the religious life of the community. We must attempt to understand how people in such a situation actually go about understanding themselves in a religious-oriented society. Religion as alluded to in this chapter follows the rationale set forth by Emile Durkheim and W. Lloyd Warner. This definition emphasizes as factors in religious life (1) a need for objectivity as a basis for any interpretation of social life, and (2) the need for certainty as a necessity. In the following discussion we shall attempt to describe the kinds of religious association found on Saint Simon Island, showing how each in particular expresses the need for objectivity and certainty. On the other hand, it will be pointed out that these particular manifestations of the religious life are related to a more basic constellation

1Available documents suggest that the black population on the Island is about 500. This group resides, predominately, in three rather distinctly differentiated communities located generally in the southern portion of the Island. For the most part, the majority of the residents of the three communities are domestic and service workers.

2Religion is defined as a "unified system of beliefs relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them." See Emile Durkheim, Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, trans. J. W. Swain (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), p. 47.

of values which are held by the community in general. This means that in the last analysis we shall attempt to state the criteria for certainty and objectivity for the total community; in other words, to give an interpretation of the religious life of Saint Simon Island.

There are on Saint Simon Island what has been termed by students\(^1\) of religious institutions a church, a denomination, and a sect. The church represents a large, all-inclusive religious association which embraces all or most of the members of a particular society, and which may even range beyond the limits of national boundaries. A sect is defined as a religious organization that is at war with the existing mores. It seeks to cultivate a state of mind and establish a code of morals different from authority. In order to accomplish this end, it inevitably seeks to set itself up in contrast with the rest of the world. Accordingly, a denomination is thought of as a sect which has made peace with the outside world, or in other words, a group no longer in conflict with other religious groups.

The Holiness Group

The Holiness Group is small but rather important with

reference to the social structure of the community. There
are about forty-five members of this group and the church
structure is a frame building of one room, though large.
Members are spoken of as "sanctified" because they have had
a so-called spiritual rebirth, in which they undergo intense
emotional experience and feel that God has entered their soul
during this process. They are Christian fundamentalists,
basing their creed on a literal interpretation of the Bible,
which book each of them has studied extensively. Conversa-
tion centering around the Bible is prevalent in everyday
contact. This group is composed of members who are very
improminent in community activities and leadership and
believe firmly in the desirability of modern formal education
and tolerance toward other religious groups, a belief that
is not shared in general by the Holiness group.

The members of this group believe in the Judaistic-
Christian omniscient God. They have varying conceptions of
Him as God. A widespread conception, however, is that of
the "Holy Spirit" enters their souls and lives therein, as
a conscience and as a protector against evil forces. God is
more realistic, more near to a being with a definite form
than any other modern Christian group.

The members of the Holiness Church find reassurance
in the group. It is within this setting that they are
impressed with the opportunity to strive for the second
degree of Christian life, sanctification. They endeavor to
shed all carnal predispositions and desires in order that
they present themselves before God and man sanctified and pure. They are taught that only a limited number of people on earth will be saved in the last days. To be among the select, one must reach the third stage of salvation, namely, become filled with the "Holy Spirit," and the test of this is some unusual experience such as a vision or a dream, hearing a heavenly voice or experiencing a miraculous healing.

It has been pointed by Ernest Troeltsch that the sect, which essentially belongs to the lower classes, and which therefore does not come to terms with thought in general, goes back to the pre-church and pre-scientific standard, and has no theology at all; it possesses a strict ethic, a living mythos, and a passionate hope for the future. To a certain extent the dame can be said to characterize the Holiness group on Saint Simon Island. One very important deviation is that among the membership there are some really solid middle class community leaders. These members, though few in number, are among the most respected individuals in the community.

The Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church has a relatively small membership, although it is fairly old in the community. It is evident that they are very much a minority with reference to the

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religious groups in the community. The membership, which is small, is composed of people whose ancestors were not born on the Island but have been residents long enough to be an accepted part of the community.

The Episcopal Church was organized in this community by a group of low visibility blacks who came to the Island prior to the turn of the century. This group of "fair-skinned" Negroes were what was commonly termed as "Big-House" Negroes. These Negroes were referred to as such because they worked as servants in the homes of the white masters rather than on the plantation. In these instances they point out that it was customary that they take on the religion of the master or owner and that is the reason that they are Episcopalians as compared to the extremely large percentages of Baptists on the Island. While they have the interest of the community there has been no effort to enlarge the membership of their church. This group manifests in every respect the notion of Sumner's "we group" and really feels that this is our Church and outsiders should not be permitted to join.

There are about thirty members of the Episcopal Church and they constitute a well-to-do group with reference to the economy. The Rector of the White Episcopal Church which serves the Sea Island community is also the rector of this Episcopal Church. Services are once a month as a rule and more frequently during the Holy Season.

If one must classify this Episcopal group, it would ordinarily be termed "low" parish for the services are simpler
and a stronger emphasis is placed on the Gospel and on personal religion. They are extremely liberal in their religious views as compared with the rest of the community. They welcome differences in emphasis among members as long as the central affirmations are maintained.

"God is as He reveals Himself," is the group's conception of the Trinity. Salvation means that "one is given the wholeness" which is God's will for man, and is delivered from arrogance and selfishness. Salvation has to do not only with the "hereafter" but also with man's present earthly existence.

The Mass and Liturgy are looked upon as being the objective manifestations of the saving present to God. Participation in the Mass as an objective structure is considered efficacious for salvation. There is room left for the individual confession of sin and pardon through the same structure. The Priest is the "ministerial representative" for Christ in His Church; he also represents the priesthood of the laity, which is shared by all who are baptized. The fact that the priest on Saint Simon Island is of the white race and not a member of the community does not, in any way, invalidate the efficacy of his office. As a matter of fact, it probably gives more objectivity to the religious ceremony and adds to the already existing interpretations of the church.

As a group the Episcopalians are nonpuritanical in most respects. They believe that it was God's intention that man enjoy life. As to drinking, card playing, dancing, and
the like, their attitudes have been "liberal," feeling that the evils come when the activities are abused. On the moral issues where the community attitude is important, this group plays a very significant role.

The Baptist Church

The Emanuel Baptist Church is the largest, and perhaps, the most highly organized religious institution on Saint Simon Island. There are 228 members of which 169 are active. The organization of this church is centered around the pastor, board of deacons, and board of trustees. There is also a deaconess board (composed of wives of deacons) but it has no official function within the church.

Undoubtedly, this church is the most influential institution in the community. Outside of the family, the persons who interact most frequently, and who go out together and those who have the greatest number of reciprocal obligations which cement the ties of intimate association, are most likely to meet at this church.

When one examines the social organization of this church, the age factor is very significant in that no individual under forty-five years of age has any position of importance. This factor brings forth a rationalization by the older residents in terms of their not being ready to assume the responsibility of leadership because of their youth. The younger members accuse their elders of attempting to maintain the status quo and resist any change that might occur if they
were in power. This reflects the fact that the community is oriented in such a manner that institutional control is in the hands of older residents.

The existence of a deaconess board in the Baptist Church is unusual because women have no official relationship to the organizational structure in terms of positions. However, the deaconess board must be considered a power to be reckoned with on any and all issues. This board is composed of the wives of members of the deacons' board and informants state that the decisions of the deacons are, in effect, the decisions of their wives. Their unofficial function in the church is to prepare for communion and investigate cases of illegitimacy and misconduct by female members.

Traditionally the Baptists have been the most democratic of American religious bodies. They believe in religious liberty for all groups, that religion is a personal relationship between the human soul and God. In this realm, nothing may intrude—no ecclesiastical system, no governmental regulation, no ordinance, no sacrament, no preacher, no priest. The saving grace of Christ and the infinite mercy of God are available to every individual, without the meditation of any priest or minister or church or system. They believe in the "priesthood of all believers." The Baptist Church is a layman's church, each church being a self-governing organization. Theoretically, the minister has no special office and is elected by the laymen of the church as one qualified to interpret the religious life of the community for the
people. In that he is only a qualified layman there is a
great latitude of interpretation within the Baptist Church.
The Baptists present a rather wide range of beliefs and
actions held together by a more basic democratic form of
government.

With the Baptist, the phrase "going to church" involves
many values and functions other than those related directly
to worship and religion. There is the display and conspicuous
consumption factor. Best clothes are worn and on special
occasions, such as the anniversary of the church and Easter
Sunday, new clothes and special preparations are involved.
Public recognition and personal satisfactions come to those
with special duties and powers. On special occasions, when
attendance is high, many go to church to see and be seen--to
socialize and make new contacts and renew old ones.

Interpretation of religious behavior

Religion is concerned with the ordering and structuring
of the individual's and society's feelings, thoughts, and
emotions. It seeks to give a symbolic interpretation of the
wholeness, potentially present within these modes of human
activities. On Saint Simon Island the dominant form of order
and structure within the community and within the individual
is exhibited by the women. This is not to say that the women
are the only possessors of religious knowledge; it simply
means that any interpretation of religion in the community
must take into consideration, in a positive or negative way,
the influence of this given structure. From our point of
view, the position of the women in the community is influential with reference to religious discussion. They define the natural\(^1\) power structure in the community and as such determine all specific power and value constellations on the institutional level.

The values of this community are inter-related with the role of the women. The dominant economic role of the women has ramifications for the total power relations in the community. In terms of Durkheim's definition, the religious life of the community consists of an attempt, on the part of the people, to give a symbolic objective formulation to an unformalized and almost unconscious constellation of values and value presuppositions. His classical formulation of religion is based on a study of a primitive society in which the rites and ceremonies can be taken at face value and thus the symbolic character of these rites can be more easily attained. In more advanced societies, the formal religious rites and ceremonies do not necessarily express the real constellation of values held by the people. As such, any interpretation of religion in a non-primitive society must seek out the rites and ceremonies which are not culturally understood as religious. We have attempted to point out the value system by discussing it in terms of the power structure of Saint Simon Island. We have thought this was necessary to establish some continuity between the formal and informal levels of the religious life.

\(^{1}\)"Natural" in this sense is used as the antithesis of supernatural.
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