Black Religious History in Cross-Cultural Perspective

If black theologian and pastor George Cummings finds himself in a state of despair over the present sociopolitical orientation of the black Baptist churches in the East Bay,[1] then the appropriate response of a like-minded Native American church leader to the current status of Native American churches might very well be utter hopelessness or outright abandonment. It is difficult to avoid using words like "paternalism," "colonialism," and "imperialism" when trying to describe a situation where the majority of pastors still are white, where the majority of churches still rely on white financial subsidy, and where nearly all of the white denominations and independent missions agencies still consider Native Americans to be missiological objects. That such conditions exist at all is testimony to the pervasive power and institutional breadth of Euro-American cultural hegemony; that these conditions persist after nearly four centuries of missionization is ample proof of white supremacist domination. The apolitical stance of the Native American churches, while no less problematic than the situation facing the black churches, takes on minor importance when compared to these other conditions, which involve questions of independence, integrity, and identity, or what Charles Long has referred to as signification.[2] As the Latin American liberation theologian Rubem Alves has said, "Many years have now gone by. Our age-old hopes have not been fulfilled. We live amid the ruins of our religious expectations. One form of captivity was abolished only to be replaced

by another. Now, in trying to find meaning in our biographies, we find that we have been steadily beating a retreat. Our backs are to the wall, and there is no escape. The exodus of which we dreamed earlier has miscarried. Instead we now find ourselves in a situation of exile and captivity."[3]

Thus, while the African American and Native American experiences with Christianity bear many similarities, they are also different in some important ways. Comparative historical and sociological study can shed light on these similarities and differences as they relate to the determinative presence of the dominant Euro-American culture. But comparative study must go beyond merely analyzing the minority experience of white racism; it must also discover the presence and interpret the meaning of interactions and relationships between the various minority communities apart from Euro-American culture. The research questions raised by comparative study are thus multidimensional in nature.

What were the constituent influences that contributed to the development of slave religion in the antebellum South? What are the social and cultural factors that have given rise to the various independent black churches since the eighteenth century? These two questions—and many others—concerning the history of black religion can be answered more fully by incorporating a comparative study of the Native American experience. There is not enough room in an essay of this scope to address either of these questions with any depth. I will attempt to outline both in order to indicate the kinds of insights such a research methodology might yield.

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Historians studying the rise and spread of "slave religion" in the antebellum South have observed that several distinct religious traditions contributed to this early stage of the African American religious experience. African slaves brought with them a variety of African traditional religions as well as some awareness of Islam and perhaps even Christianity. Contact with Native American religions and with European forms of Christianity throughout the Americas meant that these newly arrived (involuntary) immigrants had a wide diversity of religious beliefs and practices at their disposal. Albert Raboteau and Gayraud Wilmore have explored the process of religious development that gave rise to the "invisible institution" and the black church tradition in the United States. While Raboteau and Wilmore both suggest that religious interactions between African Americans and Native Americans in North America may be worth consideration, neither one has included this dimension of the history in his analysis.

Raboteau provides an overview of the range of religious influences in the opening section of Slave Religion: "African beliefs and customs persisted or were transmitted by slaves to their descendents. Shaped and modified by a new environment, elements of African folklore, music, language, and religion were transplanted in the New World by the African diaspora. Influenced by colonial European and indigenous native American cultures, aspects of the African heritage have contributed, in greater or lesser degree, to the formation of various Afro-American cultures in the New World."[4] In two passages later

on, he elaborates on the influence of South American Indian religions: "Among the slaves, traditional African beliefs (and, to a degree, Islam) continued to exist and were syncretized with Portuguese Catholic and Indian beliefs into new Afro-Brazilian forms." "The magical lore of Africa, combined with European and Indian magical customs, figured prominently in the daily lives of the slaves and their descendents."[5] But these three references represent Raboteau's only consideration of the ways in which Native American religions interacted with and influenced African slaves. While his opening comments suggest two primary influences—European Christianity and Native American traditional religions—on slave religion as it grew out of African tribal traditions, he really considers only the first.

It is worth pointing out that the index to Raboteau's book does not even include an entry for "Native Americans."[6] Perhaps Raboteau's exclusive focus on the African American experience with Christianity is partially due to a lack of documentary material that would allow for a study of the Native American influence. And yet it is interesting to note that at least two sources which he cites include passing references to a connection between the religious practices of the slaves and North American Indian traditions. A description of "the style of musical behavior of black revivalists in the Philadelphia Conference" in 1819 includes the following passage: "In the blacks' quarters, the coloured people get together, and sing for hours together, short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with long repetitious choruses. They are all sung in the merry chorus-manner of the southern

harvest field, or husking-frolic method, of the slave blacks; and also very greatly like the Indian dances. With every word so sung, they have a sinking of one or other leg of the body alternately; producing an audible sound of the feet at every step." An 1861 account of "regular religious worship of the slaves on one plantation" contains a similar observation: "It is their custom, in social worship, to work themselves up to a great pitch of excitement, in which they yell and cry aloud, and, finally shriek and leap up, clapping their hands and dancing, as it is done at heathen festivals."[7]

Like Raboteau, Wilmore also refers to the range of religious influences in the introduction to Black Religion and Black Radicalism, but without mention of the Native American dimension: "It is impossible to make a comprehensive study of the black church and religion without cognizance of the triangular relationship between the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean. Black religion began in Africa, was mixed with European Christianity in the Caribbean and in Latin America, and was further molded by, and recoiled from, American evangelical Protestantism on the slave plantations of the South and among the tiny communities of free blacks in the North."[8] Later on, though, he recognizes the influence of Native American religious traditions on slave religion:

> In the formation of a new common language, in the telling of animal tales and proverbs, in the leisure-time practice of remembered handicrafts, in the preparation of foods, homemade medicines, and magical potions and charms, in the standardization of rituals of birth, marriage, and death, in

> the creation of modes of play and parody, in the expression of favorite styles of singing, instrumental music, and the dance—in all of this and by these and other means—slaves wove for themselves the tapestry of a new African-American culture. It was a culture of human survival in the face of legal oppression and forcible acculturation. It was a culture impregnated with spiritual and occult elements of African, European, and Amerindian origin, integrated around a basically religious conception of life and reality.[9]

Wilmore summarizes his position on the question of "Africanisms" by stating that many "elements of African traditional religions were found in some form, however attenuated, in the slave community of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were absorbed to some degree into Christianity in the Caribbean and North America." He then goes on to suggest, in an undocumented comment, that "it should be noted that many [elements of African traditional religions] are also found in Amerindian religions and some attempt is being made to recover them from that source."[10] But apart from these passages, Wilmore—like Raboteau—does not attempt to analyze religious interactions between African Americans and Native Americans.

Both Raboteau and Wilmore, then, have recognized the similarities between African and Native American tribal traditions and have acknowledged that some degree of cultural and religious interactions between the groups took place. But in considering the origins and development of the African American religious tradition, both have also focused their attention on the problem of

African-European interactions, especially with regard to the process by which African Americans in the United States adopted predominantly Christian forms of religious belief and practice. Such an approach certainly addresses the concerns of the contemporary black churches and offers a revisionist alternative to white church historians, who typically marginalize the black Christian presence in the United States. But it may be worth asking whether there exist historical or ethnographic materials that could shed light on African–Native American interactions as well, in an effort to understand more fully the development of slave religion and the black churches. Not to engage in such a study is to run the risk of unintentionally reinforcing the Eurocentric paradigm of American history, which suggests that interactions between minority cultures are always mediated through white mainstream culture and that the Native American presence in American history is incidental or even negligible. Charles Long has commented on the nature of this dilemma: "If [American] culture is continually understood simply as the culture of Europeans who came to a virgin land all subsequent interpretation will tend to be wrong-headed. I have experimented with the most general categorization of American culture as an aboriginal-Euro-African culture."[11]

Against the Eurocentric paradigm of American history, we know that African Americans and Native Americans have related in a number of ways both before and after Emancipation and Removal. To list just a few: C. Eric Lincoln refers to Estevanica, the African-Spanish explorer who "discovered" the Zuni people in the American Southwest.[12] Sixteenth-century Roman Catholics

proposed that "Christianized Blacks could better convert the Indians, although it was never quite clear why 'savages and heathens' should promise greater success in the conversion enterprise than Christians with the seasoning of centuries. Perhaps the fact that slaves from Guinea brought four times as much as Indian slaves in the American market was not altogether irrelevant."[13] Perhaps the Catholics also recognized the similarities in tribal belief and practice between Africans and Native Americans. This might explain their concern over the spread of Islam among Native Americans through contact with early black Muslims.[14] It might also account for the fact that "explorers in remote areas of Brazil encountered Indians and mestizos who had learned the rudiments of Christianity from escaped slaves in the eighteenth century."[15] One of the first black Baptist ministers was George Liele, founder of the Silver Bluff (South Carolina) church, whose master, George Galpin, ran an Indian trading post there.[16] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya make brief mention of John Stewart, the black (United) Methodist missionary who served among the Wyandotte people in Ohio.[17]

The removal of the southeastern tribes to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) did not take place until the 1830s, and even then a number of isolated Native American communities remained scattered throughout the South. Escaped African slaves were harbored by the Seminoles in Spanish Florida and fought with them against U.S. military forces. Plantation owners among the southeastern tribes owned African slaves, both before and after Removal, though the practice was opposed by the majority of (more traditional)

tribal members. R. Halliburton Jr. has documented the history of slavery among the Cherokee people, including in his book a number of Cherokee slave narratives.[18] Following Emancipation, freed slaves whose former masters were tribal citizens were granted tribal citizenship, and their descendents are tribal members today. The famous Native American leader Black Hawk lives on in the tradition of the Spiritual churches in New Orleans.[19] This list could continue indefinitely; suffice it to say that African Americans and Native Americans have a long history of independent interaction that continues today. One local Native American leader has estimated, based on his own informal survey of the African American community, that at least twenty percent of African Americans lay claim to a Native American ancestor.

How might one go about studying the history of cultural and religious interactions between African American and Native Americans? A few important general works have appeared in recent years, including books by Jack Forbes[20] and William Loren Katz.[21] The vast literature on Native American history and culture may be a useful resource, though the fact that this material is catalogued by tribal group makes a comprehensive survey difficult if not impossible. The growing body of literature on African American culture and religion may one day address this question more directly. But at the present time there does not appear to be any published work on religious interactions between, for example, southeastern Indians and African slaves. It would seem that this dimension of the African American religious experience may be important in light of Wilmore's observation that "the deepest meaning of the

black experience lies in the variegated religious and philosophical acquirements of Afro-Americans," and "it is through religious doors that contemporary Afro-Americans may have to walk to find their authentic identity as a people."[22]

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A comprehensive history of the Native American Christian tradition has yet to be written, a fact which raises some interesting questions about Western scholarship. While some historical and ethnological studies devoted to single tribes or culture areas have examined the ways in which forms of Christianity have been "indigenized" among Native Americans, the only broad surveys that exist have been written from a missiological perspective. While these studies claim to tell both sides of the cultural "conflict"[23] or "encounter,"[24] their Eurocentric orientation prevents them from being anything more than histories of missions. One work does claim to be an "Introduction to Native American Church History"[25] but it, too, tells the story from the perspective of the missionary.

But perhaps the absence of a history of the Native American Christian tradition is not a problem of scholarship but of missiology. A key question involved in trying to understand the history of Christianity among Native Americans is this: Why is there still not an independent Native American church tradition, as there has been among African Americans for more than two hundred years? Phrased this way, the question is somewhat misleading, for there <u>are</u> Native American Christian communities that have been

independent of white control and white support, though they often go unacknowledged. The Narragansett church in Rhode Island has been autonomous since the eighteenth century, and independent Baptist and Methodist churches have been active among the southeastern tribes since early in the nineteenth century. The Native American Church (the peyote religion) has incorporated a variety of Christian beliefs and practices into its tradition, and many members consider themselves to be Christians. The Indian Shakers of the Pacific Northwest also have adapted Christianity to their own, pre-Christian, religion. Perhaps the question should be phrased like this: Why are there no independent Native American denominations, analogous to the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the National Baptist Convention, i.e., originally related to but now distinct from white mainline denominations?

The most recent survey of "the Native American Christian community" highlights the extent of the problem. R. Pierce Beaver profiles denominational agencies in about forty denominations, and for almost all of them "Indian work" is a division of national missions. He also lists another two-dozen independent, nondenominational mission agencies that target Native Americans. The ministry statistics, based on voluntary responses to mailed surveys, indicate that 2,048 churches are served by 553 Indian clergy and 718 non-Indian clergy. [26] Why do so many Indian churches still rely on denominational support for their economic survival? Why are there still more white missionaries than Indians leading Indian churches? Why do the mainline denominations continue to view Native Americans as missiological objects? In

other words, why have Native Americans been unwilling or unable to establish "self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating"[27] denominational churches, while the historic black churches have been the primary institutional force behind the African American struggle for survival and liberation?

Before trying to answer these questions directly, it may be worthwhile to review the various theories explaining the rise of the independent black churches. Will Gravely has observed that the central problem of black religious historiography has shifted from the question of African survivals to one of causality. "If the primary historiographical question regarding the rise of African churches is to search for the causes of racially based religious separation, interpretive traditions have commonly emphasized one of two alternatives. The focus has either been on the story of white discrimination and the moral failure of American Christianity, or it has been a celebration of the origin of a Black culture with separate churches—an important feature of its infrastructure." Gravely documents these two interpretive traditions in order to demonstrate that the problem is more complex than is often realized. He suggests three additional historical factors: "the legal achievement and guarantee of religious freedom; the rise of denominationalism in the Second Great Awakening as part of an organizational revolution in American Protestantism; and the compromise within mainstream American religion before 1820 over slavery."[28]

Wilmore concentrates on the first of Gravely's traditions when he lists "the quest for independence from white control" as the first of "three

characteristics of the radical tradition in black religion."[29] "The independent church movement among blacks, during and following the period of the Revolutionary War, must be regarded as the prime expression of resistance to slavery—in every sense, the first black freedom movement." "Born in protest, tested in adversity, led by eloquent and courageous preachers, the black church was the cutting edge of the freedom movement during most of the nineteenth century."[30] Regarding the reason why black Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians did not establish denominations independent from white control, Wilmore suggests three differences between them and the Baptist and Methodists: "In the first place, being fewer in number, they did not precipitate the crisis over seating experienced during the large ingathering of citizens and former slaves into the Methodist and Baptist churches. Secondly, there were stronger class affinities and a greater similarity of complexion with the whites among those who were attracted to the other three denominations. Thirdly, the emphasis on an educated ministry in those denominations kept the number of black preachers small."[31]

Lincoln and Mamiya, in separate chapters on black Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals, point out that white racism played a central role in the development of racially segregated denominations. They also suggest, however, that other factors were involved; for example, "partly as a result of heightened race consciousness, partly in reaction to the discrimination of southern white Baptists and the paternalism of northern white Baptists, the independent church movement initiated among black Baptists in the

antebellum period intensified during the Reconstruction and its aftermath."[32] Presumably, what they refer to as "heightened race consciousness" is an expression of what Gravely considers to be the positive development of black culture. It seems clear that this kind of sentiment is evident in the decision by the two largest black Methodist denominations to retain the term "African" in their names.

But do these historic factors adequately describe the origin and development of the independent black denominations? It can be argued that Native Americans have experienced white racism to an extent comparable to the African American experience, though this racism has often taken different forms. Native Americans encountered warfare, disease, and land dispossession at a time when African Americans were being subjected to enslavement. The Civil War brought an end to slavery, but it was soon replaced by an elaborate system of segregation. During this same period, however, white attitudes toward Native Americans shifted to paternalistic assimilationism. The reservation system, whereby Native Americans were segregated geographically, thus allowed white churches to missionize without facing the question of integrated fellowship on a widespread basis.

With respect to the question of cultural development, it is clear that the black church has served a unique role as an institutional focal point in the black community. Among Native Americans, however, the various institutions operating in Indian communities (apart from those ceremonial, medicine, and warrior societies which survived the encounter with Euro-Americans) have

been primarily colonial in nature: the Bureau of Indian Affairs, federally sanctioned tribal governments, and missionary-controlled churches. While the question of institutional control is critical, an even more important difference between the African American and Native American experiences may be the persistence of tribalism among Native Americans. Tribalism might be defined rather broadly in terms of both linguistic and religio-cultural distinctiveness. While African tribalism was not completely destroyed during the period of slavery, African American identity did emerge as a primarily racial, not tribal, phenomenon. Though there has been a gradual increase in racial identification among Native Americans, through the loss of language and the sharing of cultural and religious traditions among tribes, it is arguable that Native Americans still rely primarily on a tribal identification. The persistence of tribalism has been a key obstacle to the development of any kind of intertribal Native American Christian tradition, and suggests that the detribalization of African Americans cannot be underestimated in considering causes for the rise of the black church tradition.

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I have barely scratched the surface of only two very complex research problems. In any event, I submit that this superficial analysis does at least demonstrate that there are lessons to be learned from an approach to historical study which crosses cultural, temporal, and disciplinary boundaries. While it is true that Eurocentric scholars—and they more than anyone—need to incorporate into their work a multicultural scope, it seems imperative that all

of us strive to avoid the narrow provincialism that sometimes—not always, but sometimes—creeps into our efforts to tell heretofore untold stories, to give voice to the voiceless, to transform "myths" and "folklore" into "history" by doing the research that Eurocentric scholars have been unwilling to do. After all, advocacy scholarship is as much about changing the rules of the game as it is about getting into the game in the first place.

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