

AFROCENTRISM VS. CHRISTIANITY: COMPLEMENT OR CONFLICT

By Carl F. Ellis, Jr
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From the 1700's to this day, the issue of Black vs. Christian has been at the center of a great debate among African-American followers of Jesus a debate which has transcended our identities as Colored, Negro, Afro-American, Black, or African-American. Through the years African-American Christians have also grappled with the most appropriate strategy for success in America. Should we assimilate into "mainstream" life or consolidate around our cultural resources? In other words, should we opt for "integration" or "Black nationalism," "Multiculturalism" or "Afro-centrism?" What is the relationship between "Afro-centrism" and "Christo-centrism?" Are they compatible, incompatible or mutually exclusive?

It is interesting that many well meaning Christians raise an eyebrow at the mention of Afro-centrism, yet don't even so much as wink at the reality of Euro-centrism. Let me illustrate from European history.

First, many of us call ourselves "Protestant." In order to identify with this term, one must presuppose spiritual roots in European church history. The term "Protestant" comes from "protesting against the Roman Catholic Church." Neither Roman Catholicism nor Protestantism emerged in Africa, Asia, or anywhere else outside Europe. This is not to say that we have not derived great benefit from brilliant European reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin. Indeed, their scriptural insights give us much to praise God for. Luther launched the Reformation with his theology of Salvation. Calvin buttressed and advanced the Reformation with his theology of Christ's Lordship.

Second, it is widely known that a major influence on John Calvin was an obscure African theologian named Augustine of Hippo. Without Augustine's African theological contribution,

the Protestant Reformation in Europe would have been a mere “flash in the pan.” Oops, we’re getting into Afro-centric thinking and we must be careful lest we transgress.

Third, we have all heard the story of how on October 29, 1517, Martin Luther tacked his “95 thesis” on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Most historians acknowledge this as the spark, which ignited the Protestant Reformation. While this is true, few acknowledge that a major driving force behind the Reformation was German nationalism. In those days, what is now Germany was part of the “Holy Roman Empire.” Thus the German church was under Roman control. The time-honored assumption was, “You cannot be a culturally German and Christian. To be a Christian you must be culturally Roman.” When Luther translated the Bible into German and advocated German control of the German church, he liberated his people from Roman-centric marginalization. For the first time they were free to be German Christians. Would this be considered “German-centrism?” Call it what you will, without this creative cultural force unleashed by Luther’s German Christian ideas, the Reformation would have been crushed by the Roman Church into historic obscurity.

Like German Christians of the 1500's, many African-American Christians today wrestle with the issue of ethnic identity. This is a legitimate biblical concern. How else can you explain the inclusion of so many genealogies and “tables of nations” in the Bible? When God delivered the Children of Israel from the grip of Egyptian slavery, He not only gave them the Law, He also restored to them their history and culture. On this basis, God raised their consciousness regarding the important role they would play in His global redemptive purpose. It is my observation that these are the kind of issues behind today’s call for Afro-centrism.

The problem we have with *modern* Afro-centrism is its philosophical base in secular ethnocentrism. The same *should* be said about modern Euro-centrism. However, African-American Christians today seem to have a bad case of theological amnesia.

Afro-centrism is nothing new to the historic African-American Christian community. Have you ever wondered why so many of the early African-American churches and Christian organizations had “african” in their names? For example, the African Baptist Churches, the African Methodist Episcopal Churches (AME), AME Zion Churches, the Free African Society, and the African Presbyterian Churches to name a few. It is clear that they identified with Africa. Have you wondered what was behind this identification? Let’s take a look.

Like the struggle for freedom and dignity, historic theology of the African-American church developed along two streams, *northern* and *southern*. In both cases, an overarching biblical pattern and theme (paradigm) developed for doing ministry.

Of course, like all other Bible believing communities, the historic African-American church preached Christ crucified and risen, and the doctrines of salvation by grace through faith. The ministry paradigm came in the way the church applied its faith to the surrounding community.

In the antebellum South, the theological paradigm was the “exodus.” The slaves identified with the children of Israel in Egyptian bondage and saw the hand of God at work in terms of their hope in deliverance from slavery. This theology was oriented toward *survival*.

In the antebellum North where slavery had died out, the theological paradigm was the “exile.” The “freedmen” saw the hand of God at work in terms of a special calling they sensed B a calling to bring the gospel of Christ to the rest of the “African diaspora” (people of African descent living in the South, Canada, the Caribbean, and Africa) and beyond. By the 1820's this “Pan-African” Christian movement was well established and it lasted through the 1880's. Rev. Nathaniel Paul (pastor of the African Baptist Society in Albany, NY) believed that people of African descent should return to Africa to spread the gospel of Christ. Rev. James Theodore

Holly and Rev. Martin Robinson Delany advocated the establishment of a strong Black Christian nation in Africa or the Caribbean. The purpose would be to use its economic, diplomatic, and military powers to rescue Africa and African peoples from the destructive aims and policies of other nations. Rev. James W. C. Pennington argued that African-Americans had a special obligation to become involved in African missions. Others like Rev. A. W. Hanson, Augustus Washington and Lewis Woodson argued that the destiny of African-Americans was tied up with the destiny of Africa. Rev. Alexander Crummell (mentor to W. E. B. DuBios) emphasized the need for economic development in Africa for the sake of Africans.

Had it fully developed, exilic paradigm theology would have empowered our people toward missions while addressing the need for identity, purpose and a sense of significance in the economy of God.

With the end of slavery, the indigenous African-American church experienced explosive growth. A major factor was the adoption of the “exilic” theological paradigm by the Northern and Southern churches. Thus, the church played a major role in bringing definition to the African-American experience. It also became active in missions, especially in western and southern Africa.

However, the end of the post-Civil War Reconstruction in the South among other factors altered this situation. The social progress of the former slaves was impeded, as they had to cope with a rising tide of terrorism and intimidation. The missions activity in Africa was devastated as colonialism consolidated its hold.

This trauma forced the church to abandon its concern for identity and missions and revert to the old survival approach, which emerged in the context of slavery. This resulted in a *theological vacuum*, as the church no longer played a role in bringing definition to the African-American experience.

With the development of urbanization came new social and cultural challenges. If the church had addressed the issues of identity and significance in the economy of God, it would have continued to be a major player. But the church no longer addressed these issues. Thus the “Christian consensus” began to erode. The current state of crisis in the African-American community is testimony to this.

Today’s intense interest in Afro-centrism is directly related to the perception that it offers the much needed definitional dimension, i.e., a sense of identity and significance in the economy of God. Christianity will continue to be perceived as irrelevant as long as the church remains relatively silent regarding these issues of concern.

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