Defiant Spirituality: Care Traditions in the Black Churches

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As a child, on the many occasions when I was caught violating some parental injunction or moral rule, I braced myself for a familiar and crude form of retributive justice, the spanking/lecture. I remember mama going into the back yard in search of a switch (in the winter a belt sufficed). In the brief moments between the discovery of the infraction and the bestowing of punishment, I experienced deep penitence and a quickened respect for the law and the lawgiver. But I was always baffled by mama’s insistence, as she whipped me, that this spanking was in my best interest. She spanked me out of love. Even more puzzling was her proclivity for trying to engage in moral education and conversation during the trauma. It was, after all, a spanking/lecture — a complex form of care and discipline. She never realized that was not a particularly good time for me to listen or talk.

Care and discipline possess very different feeling tones for me. Care is warm; discipline is cold. Care is something we desire, like grandma’s peach cobbler; discipline something we endure, like cough syrup. Like love and justice, the two belong in dynamic relationship so that human life may be well-ordered and whole. For the Christian community, the dialectics of care and discipline, love and justice, are central features of our relationship to God in Jesus Christ. And it is in the life of the congregation that we experience these sacraments most fully.

In this essay I will develop the following thesis: the modes of care and discipline typical of black churches may offer valuable clues to all Christians in Western, industrialized nations regarding personal fulfillment and social transformation. My presentation unfolds in three movements. First, I describe six dominant ritual vehicles for effecting care and discipline in the black churches. Taken as an integrated congregational culture, I

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characterize this ensemble as *defiant spirituality*. Second I characterize the challenge to which this spirituality is a response as the *religious reconstruction of reality*. Finally, I briefly identify some of the gifts which the black church is qualified to offer to other Christian, and perhaps non-Christian, communities.

**DEFIANT SPIRITUALITY**

As interpreters of black religion have already reminded us, there is no such monolithic, undifferentiated social institution known as the black church (Sernett, 1985). Rather, there are varieties of black churches which share a common core culture. This black church core culture is an amalgam of numerous elements (traditional African religion, Islam, Catholic popular piety, Protestant evangelicalism, and American civil religion) which have been forged into the dynamic spiritual expression I am naming defiant spirituality. Notwithstanding differences in polity, dogma, or socio-economic indicators, that expression is vibrant and consistent in nearly all black churches. Even predominantly white churches which have a substantial black membership have been transformed by the infusion of this tradition's dynamism.

I would like to suggest that there are six elements which distinguish African American Christian defiant spirituality: sense engaging worship, imaginative preaching, intimate prayer, cathartic shouting, triumphant singing, and integrative social ministry. Defiant spirituality responds to the dual and interrelated imperatives to transform individuals and social structures. Indeed, any church which shares this understanding of its mission will be a "public church" (Coleman, 1982; Marty, 1981).

Because defiant spirituality originates within the milieu of oppressive psycho-social conditions, it nurtures a defiant, counter-culture consciousness which seeks both to preserve and transform society. As Peter Paris (1985) observes, the black church became a "surrogate society" for African Americans; hence it developed conserving moral and social virtues useful for preserving the only safe, stable institution under black control. However, given the church's prophetic mission to make justice roll down like waters, it has developed radical, visionary, and courageous virtues necessary for coercing and inviting social change. This preserving/transforming mission of black churches was most evident during the years of the modern civil rights movement, a church-based, church-led American social movement. Defiant spirituality nurtures personal virtues such as public-spiritedness, generosity, courage, and keen sensitivity to the least advantaged member...