

The Role of Religion toward African American Struggles

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Abstrak

This essay of African American history is intended to elucidate the role that African Christianity plays in African American struggles in achieving the American ideals of freedom and equality. Upon the opinion that American people owe much from African American struggles the real meaning of freedom and equality which come from their long historical strike for their lives and liberties in the American land, this essay elaborate African American struggles from antebellum period into civil right movement in 1960s.

Kata kunci: African Christianity, freedom, equality.

Introduction

The history of African Americans is the history of resistance and struggle from white's oppression rooted since slavery in the colonial times. Whites regard America -the New World- as land of freedom and opportunity to build a better life. On the contrary, for African Americans, the New World is a place where they began their long historical struggles for achieving freedom and equality. Since the very beginning of the nation history, African Americans have always been associated as merely inferior and excluded from the mainstream life. This subordinate position, then, has forced them to resist the system built upon white's supremacy and at the same time find their ways to revolt to liberate themselves.

It is already known that African American religion can not be separated from their liberation tradition. Yet how the religion plays its role in African American's struggles is still debatable. Concerning this issue, Harris (1999: 5) in *Something Within: Religion in African American Political Activitism* states that two conflicting perspectives prevail. The first is called the opiate theory. It insists that African Christianity promotes otherworldliness which functions as an instrument of political pacification and fatalism. The second perspective is exactly of the opposite side. It argues that African Christianity has played a central role in African American's struggles, catalyzing, for example, the collective involvement of African Americans in the modern civil right movement.

Opiate theory argues that religion works as a means of social control, offering African Americans a way to cope with personal and societal difficulties and thus undermining their willingness to actively challenge racial inequalities. This view considers that religion pacifies oppressed groups so that they would accept their subordinate status in society. Moreover this view believes that African Christianity teaches

blacks to be meek and humble and to turn the other cheek when they should retaliate in kind. From this outlook it can be said that African Christianity is taken as an important factor working against the African American's radicalism .

On the other side of this opinion, some have contended that African Christianity inspires political liberation and activism. To put in another word this inspirational view sees black churches and religion in providing an inspiration for political involvement among African Americans. Religion in this case is seen as a source to spur political involvement. This view put emphasis on the pivotal role of religious ideal toward people. They believe that religious ideals are potentially powerful sources of commitment and motivation, and these ideals should not be underestimated as resources for participation. Moreover they urge that being forced by these religious ideals, people or human beings will make enormous sacrifices if they believe themselves to be driven by divine force.

The following section is attempted to uncover how religion plays its role in each different period of African American struggles which is divided in three periods: the Antebellum era, the Postbellum period and the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

Result and Discussion

In the spectrum of African American experience, Antebellum era dealt with how slaves freed themselves from their master and how abolitionists tried to accelerate the voice of freedom and equality to the entire nation. Turner's insurrection and Douglass' lecture for the American Anti-Slavery Society are taken as important example of African American struggles in this period. Turner and Douglass are two prominent African American leaders whose actions were taken seriously by whites. Turner's was called the most significant antebellum revolt. Following this revolt southern states increased their surveillance and repression of African American activities (Trotter, 2001: 203). Douglass was the most effective lecturer of the American Anti-Slavery Society. It was a national organization with 150.000 members formed in 1833 which aimed to influence public opinion by appealing the conscience of white America by using biblical verses and American ideals of freedom and equality (Todd and Curti, 1976: 341).

Although it could not be denied that the regulatory statutes and white's oppression also provided the enforcement for slaves to incite insurrections, it was very obvious that Afro-Christianity was the reason of this mystical rebellious person to make a strike against his slave master in the Nat Turner rebellion 1831. Turner felt that he had been selected by driven power to deliver his people from slavery.

"All my time, not devoted to my master's service, was spent either in prayer or in making experiments"

“Having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, wrapped myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer”

“As I was praying one day at my plough, the spirit spoke to me saying ‘Seed you the kingdom of heaven and all things shall be added unto you’. And then again I had the same revelation which fully confirmed me in the impression that I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty.”

Those quoted words derives from the confession of Nat Turner 1831. It is clear that the struggle he wanted was aimed to get freedom from bondage which was triggered by his consciousness developed by his religious view and practice. Religion in Turner’s case was played as a source from which he became introspective and self critical. Religion was a powerful source to liberate himself and made him an active participant to freed him from bondage.

Frederick Douglass spoke similar voice. His revelation of Christianity led him to distinguish the Christianity of America and the Christianity of Christ. He believed that the latter rejects slavery and he saw inconsistency which regards to the hypocrisy within white’s communities and religion.

What! Preach, and kidnap men?
Give thanks, and rob thy afflicted poor?
Talk of thy glorious liberty, and then
bold hand the captive’s door?

What! Servant of thy own
Merciful son, who came to seek and save
the homeless and the outcast, fettering down
the tasked and plundered slave!

Religion took this role since it was the main source available for African Americans. From the Bible they read, African Americans were accustomed with the story of many ancient people who were oppressed and were helped by God. Brotherhood of men or the escape of the Hebrew from bondage was noticeable whenever they read their Bible. Seeing this way, the Bible stood as a means providing a spirit of resistance and the potential for their rebellion. In general African American religion had helped the slaves retained some sense of being somebody in God’s eyes. This was powerful antidote to being no body in the eyes of the whites.

Postbellum period was marked by the growing pattern of segregation and discrimination. African Americans confronted the condition and demanded recognition of their constitutional rights and economic justice. Responding to the intensified legal barrier of social access, African Americans strengthen their community culture and church. Among them there were two prominent leaders in this period: Booker T Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Both looked to education for

African American liberation. However they developed different strategies.

Washington believed that in order to change their recent condition, African Americans must do some useful service that the world wanted. He found the vocational education was the answer. Moreover he was on the opinion to convince whites that the education of African Americans was in the true interest of the South. Based on this view Washington fought for the integration of African American citizens in American life. He saw their economic freedom as a means to achieve the ultimate freedom for African Americans. His struggle in general was promoting racial harmony between black and white in achieving black progress and he did it through education. It can be seen that his point of view had given a great contribution for African Americans' achievement at that time. Many whites, both Northerners and Southerners supported Washington's point of view. By convincing whites that their struggle was not harmful for white's society; African American could get many opportunities to strengthen their religious, social and political institutions, the legacy which came to fruition in the next period. What Washington had done through his belief in African American education is a useful way in getting black a gradual and proper place in American society.

Du Bois, on the other hand, fought the program of Washington and demanded full and immediate equality for African Americans. Unlike Washington who was relatively disinterested in political and civil rights for blacks, Du Bois saw both rights were important in African American struggles in order to achieve freedom and equality. Du Bois opposed Washington's program which he believed as narrow educational one which was too predominantly economic in its objectives. Du Bois urged for higher education which resulted in achieving the higher aims of life and produced a truly black man. In achieving his goal Du Bois also believed in the separation between white and black communities. He was one among those African Americans who supported the exodus to Liberia. Du Bois way of struggle in some part can also be seen had given important contribution as that of Washington. It gave blacks another option to respond to their condition. The two different ways proposed by these two opposing great men had given lesson to blacks in general that there were various possible ways to achieve freedom and equality.

In this postbellum period religion did not play as obvious as at the time of Turner and Douglass. Yet Washington's and Du Bois' ideas of the importance of education were supported by Black church. This is as asserted by Trotter (2001: 331): "Partly as a result of black (church) activism the member of school for black students increased from less than a dozen during the early postwar years to twenty seven in 1900, including a high school". The preachers often invited spokesman of these two groups to their congregations emphasizing issues of the acquisition of education for African American's children. Thus it can be seen that black church played a key role in the development of black education - a way of struggle to achieve equality and to change social

condition in postbellum period. Church served as the central organization of African American life providing sources to foster the idea of liberation as a result of the elimination of blacks from American's mainstream. This church involvement in social activity to liberate blacks is what in E. Franklin Frazier's phrase "a nation within a nation".

The twentieth century gave dramatic changes to African American movement. During the 1950s and 1960s African Americans moved their struggles to streets. The civil rights movement adapted non violent direct action strategy for social change. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the central person in this period. The movement gained national support because the Southern Christian Leadership - of which King was president- was deeply rooted in African American grassroots with the churches played the central part. The organization was supported by many black's grassroots such as NAACP, CRA, and the Urban League. This is as stated by Farber (1994: 74) "The civil rights struggle for African Americans centered on the Southern Christian Leadership has involved the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Urban League, and others." This national's supports were the result of his occupation as black's preacher. Being a minister not only put King in touch with the spirit of the black masses but also gave him a base within the black church, then and now the strongest and most independent of black institutions. Thus it can be seen that church was closely connected to other sources of black's activism which promoted collective resistance of African Americans. The church had performed the same function in postbellum period.

King was a religious man who believed had been chosen to lead his people to react the condition through non violent action. "I could hear an inner voice saying to me, Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And I will be with you, even until the end of the world." (Holling and Cappi, 2001). Upon this confession, it is obvious that King shared the same view with that of Turner. His religious' conscience had led him to escort his people in the movement. "King was a preacher who spoke in biblical cadences ideally suited to leading a stride toward freedom that found its inspiration in the Old Testament story of the Israelites and the New Testament gospel of Jesus Christ. (Farber, 1994: 77)

As Christian Integrationist's leader, King considered blacks as both African and American. He believed it is possible to achieve justice in the United States and to create wholesome relations with the white community. This optimism built based upon white political and religious documents which in conclusion point out that there is no room for enslaving and segregating blacks within the white community. In

integrationists' point of view, therefore, African Americans have the same freedom as white enjoy.

Moreover as non-violent advocate of equal rights King, too, believed that African Americans could find justice in the United States and safely intertwine their future with that of the white majority. On this ground it can be seen that integrationist point of view is similar with that of Booker T Washington. King was a kind of optimistic person who believes that blacks would soon achieve full freedom in America. The differences between King and Washington lie in the form of their struggles. Washington's put an emphasis on education particularly vocational education while King's set peaceful demonstration and kind of civil disobedience.

African Americans struggles proposed by King once again can be taken as evident that religion has played as inspiration rather than an opiate view. King took African Christianity as the fundamental and basic reason for their struggles and used African religious institution as the center of his collective non violent actions.

Conclusion

In their struggle for equality African Americans have turned to Bible to argue for their rights. The biblical teaching of human equality represents a liberating principle for their struggles. By putting forward biblical teaching, African Americans present the intellectual and theological justice for their rights. Upon this point, African Christianity has served as inspirational view spurring African Americans to be active participants in collective struggles against racial discrimination. The churches have functioned as sources for social and political actions throughout the three distinct historical periods of their struggles.

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