

Black Church Homophobia: What to Do About It?

By Kelly Brown Douglas

The issue of sexuality, especially non-hetero expressions of sexuality, is a complex matter within the Black Church community. Even with all of their diversity, Black Church people are regarded as strikingly similar in their attitudes toward non-heterosexual sexualities. They are viewed as not simply homophobic but more homophobic than other populations of society.

There is probably no issue that better highlights Black Church views toward non-hetero sexuality than that of same-sex marriages. A recent Pew study indicated that the Black Church community was more opposed to these marriages than other communities. The study cited 64 percent of African Americans opposing same-sex marriages, a percentage that had held steady for several years, while the overall population had become less opposed to these marriages (from 41 percent in 1996 to 30 percent in 2003).¹

The Black Church community's obstinate stance in regard to issues surrounding gay and lesbian rights is most striking when one considers both the historical black struggle for social equality and the Black Church's prominent role within that struggle. It appears inconsistent, if not hypocritical, for the Black Church to be in the forefront of racial justice concerns, yet resistant, if not repressive, when it comes to the rights of non-heterosexual persons. How are we to account for this closed-mindedness when it comes to non-hetero expressions of sexuality? Is it possible to move the Black Church community toward a more equitable view?

What must first be appreciated is the Black Church's heterogeneous character. The Black Church community is not a monolithic reality. This Church is a disparate collective of churches that reflect the diversity of the black community itself. These churches are diversified by origin, denomination, doctrine, worshiping culture, spiritual ethos, class, size, and other less obvious factors. They may be within white denominational structures or

independent of them. They can reflect congregational, connectional, or episcopal polities. They can be urban, suburban, or rural. They range in size and structure from storefronts to mega-churches. Yet, as disparate as black churches are, they share a common history and play a unique role in black life, both of which attest to their collective identity as the Black Church. In short, black churches emerged as a fundamental part of black peoples' active resistance to dehumanizing white racist oppression, even as they have played a central role in black people's struggle for life and freedom.

Moreover, while this essay focuses on the prevalent and pervasive homophobic sentiment of the Black Church, it recognizes that there are various black churches with more liberating and progressive views toward sexual expression and even same-sex marriages. One such prominent black church is Covenant Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., with co-pastors Christine Wiley and Dennis Wiley. This church not only welcomes gay and lesbian persons, but its pastors also perform same-sex blessings.²

I must also clarify the vantage point from which I speak. I am a black female Episcopal priest who also claims my voice as a womanist theologian. Thus, I represent that aspect of the Black Church community that is a part of a white denominational system. As a black Episcopalian, however, my story of faith is inextricably linked to the story of Absalom Jones, a former slave, co-founder of the Free African Society, co-initiator of the independent Black Church movement (along with Richard Allen), and the first black Episcopal priest. Jones signifies the persis-



tent black presence within the Episcopal church that constantly advocates for racial justice within the denomination and whose primary identification is with the wider black community in the struggle against white racism.

Furthermore, even though the denominational system of which I am a part might be considered more progressive in its views toward non-heterosexuals—as it allows for the blessing of same-sex unions, ordains self-identified non-heterosexual persons, and recently consecrated a gay bishop (though this latter act has in fact divided the worldwide Anglican communion). The black Episcopal community with which I identify tends to mirror the prevailing attitudes of the wider Black Church community.³ While there are black Episcopal voices that are supportive of gay and lesbian rights within the church, there are also significant black voices that are not. Interestingly, the most strident opposition to the recent consecration of a gay bishop has been from the African continent, suggesting perhaps a consistency of passion throughout the African diaspora when it comes to non-heterosexual sexualities.⁴ For instance, during a recent address to a national gathering of black Episcopal clergy, those who responded most harshly to my lecture on sexuality were several clergymen from the African continent. They were quite clear that homoeroticism was something that the “African” continent could simply not tolerate. Even more telling, perhaps, were the responses from the African American clergy—they were conspicuously silent, as if refusing to engage such a topic. Nonetheless, it is from out of and to the wider black faith community, of which black Episcopalians are a part, that I speak.

Denominational affiliation notwithstanding, my womanist identity further compels me to speak about matters of sexual injustice. As a womanist theologian I am “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”⁵ I am, therefore, obliged to speak to any form of injustice whether it is present within the black community or in the wider society. More specifically, womanist scholars are compelled by our very womanist identity to interrogate homophobic attitudes and heterosexist systems and structures as they exist within the Black Church community in an effort to “debunk” and dismantle them.⁶ These very attitudes and systems have certainly infringed upon the lives of many black women and men. They have most notably contributed to the Black Church community’s slow response to the HIV/AIDS crisis that now ravages the black community.⁷ Thus, if for no other reason, the womanist commitment to “survival

and wholeness” compels a discerning theological response to issues of sexuality.

Womanist theologians, therefore, cannot ignore that aspect of the womanist definition that states that a “womanist loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually.”⁸ It is the inherent task of those of us who claim our voice as womanist theologians to work toward creating a church and community where non-heterosexual persons are able to love themselves and those whom they choose to love without social, political, or ecclesiastical penalty so that they, along with all other black men and women, may enjoy life and “wholeness.” It is from out of my commitment as a womanist theologian that I address the homophobia/heterosexism of the Black Church community. Let us now examine the complex nature of homophobia/heterosexism within the Black Church community as it has been most recently manifest in the debate surrounding same-sex marriages.

As central as the Bible is to the black faith tradition, there is another key element of black faith that also informs black people’s responses to homoeroticism: that which I refer to as a *platonized theology* and what black novelist James Baldwin has aptly described as “Protestant Puritanism.” Platonized theology shapes an influential strand of the Christian tradition. This theology notably places the body in an antagonistic relationship with the soul. The soul is divinized while the body is demonized. The soul is revered as the key to salvation. The body is condemned as a source of sin. The locus of bodily sin is human passion—that is, sexual pleasure. This “sacred” disdain for the sexual body pervades the Christian theological tradition, particularly as it has given way to a definite sexual ethic. Specifically, platonized Christianity advocates a dualistic sexual ethic. That is, it suggests only two ways in which to engage sexual activity, one tolerable, not inherently sinful, and the other intolerable, and, therefore, sinful. Procreative use is tolerably good; non-procreative use is intolerably evil. Characteristic of platonized Christianity, a third possibility is not permitted. A platonized sexual ethic does not allow for sexual activity to be an expression of an intimate, loving relationship. Platonized Christianity severs intimate sexuality from loving relationality.

Platonized Christianity became an influential part of the black faith tradition during the eighteenth-century religious revivals. During these revivals a significant population of black men and women were converted to Evangelical Protestant thought, the principle conduit of platonized Christianity in America. Black church people most affected by this

evangelical tradition tend to affirm the assertions of Paul that one should “make no provision for flesh,” but if one must engage in sexual behavior, “it is better to marry than to burn.” At the same time, reflecting this platonized tradition, black church people tend to view homoerotic sexuality as lustful, sinful behavior. Since it is not viewed as procreative, it is not considered a “proper” form of sexual expression and thus is not seen as deserving the shelter of marriage. In this respect, black church people’s concept of a hyper-proper sexuality is driven not simply by white patriarchal heterosexist norms, but most significantly by a platonized Christian theology—though the two narratives coincide when it comes to homosexuality and same sex marriages.

It is also interesting to note that these narratives also coincide when it comes to women. Both define women’s sexuality in terms of their capacity to procreate, thus in relation to men. Such a view ostensibly denies black women the possibility of non-procreative and hence non-male centered sexual expression. Such recognition once again compels a womanist response. Just as white patriarchal heterosexist social narratives and platonized theology disavow the propriety of non-heterosexual expressions of sexuality, so also do they work together to uphold the center of patriarchal power: a heterosexual male-centered family where women’s primary role is to procreate or at least to support the male-centered family. There was no greater example of this insidious interplay between patriarchal and heterosexist narratives than a sermon given by a prominent black pastor in Washington D.C. From his Sunday pulpit, he vulgarly attacked homosexual persons, particularly lesbians. He argued that black lesbianism is a result of strong black women who believe that they can survive without a man (specifically black women who earn more than their husbands). The implications were clear: inasmuch as black women defined themselves independently of black men they were in danger of becoming lesbians and they were certainly a threat to the black family—hence independent black women needed to be subdued.

More to the point, however, black church people’s vehement responses to same-sex marriage as well as homosexuality reflects a *theo-historical dynamic* that is grounded in a platonized theology and propelled by a history of racial sexualized oppression. James Baldwin puts it best when he says:

It is very important to remember what it means to be born in a Protestant Puritan country, with all the taboos placed on the flesh, and have at the same time in this country such a vivid example of a decent pagan imagination and the sexual liberty with which

white people invest Negroes—and then penalize them for . . . It’s a guilt about the flesh. In this country the Negro pays for that guilt which white people have about flesh.”

And indeed black people do pay for that guilt, at least in their views toward sexuality. With this understanding we can now answer what it is that has compelled the Black Church community to respond with such passion regarding same-sex marriages.

The issue of same-sex marriages is considered a direct affront to black people’s sense of struggle, experience of oppression, and faith tradition. As such this issue exposes the social, historical, and most importantly theological factors that coalesce to provide a “perfect storm” for bringing to the surface prevailing black attitudes toward non-heterosexuality. While homophobia and heterosexism may be the result of this storm of issues, it is a homophobia and heterosexism born from the struggle of being black in a society hostile to black humanity. Nevertheless, both are still a problem because they limit the life options of non-heterosexual women and men, and, perhaps even more sinfully, suborns violence against them. So, while we may appreciate the complexity of black homophobia and heterosexism, it still must be addressed and hence eradicated. Left to answer is how to move the Black Church in the direction of becoming a more equitable and just community in regard to matters of women and non-heterosexuality.

Before I continue further, I must offer a caveat. What I will now briefly put forward reflects only my preliminary thoughts as I move toward a fuller understanding of the issue of same-sex marriage and what it might mean in regard to the Black Church community. Thus, what follows are at this point for me theological signposts that compel further theological reflection.

The first signposts are found in black people’s own historical experience with contested marriages. To reiterate, the black enslaved were routinely denied the privilege to marry. Marriage was considered a right granted to human beings capable of loving relationships. Because black people were considered less than human, that is, beastly chattel, they were thought incapable of such loving relationality. Consequently, they typically were not granted the right to marry. Yet, despite the hardships and brutality associated with doing so, enslaved men and women routinely risked both life and freedom in order to marry the one they loved. The question is why? What was it that was so significant about the marriage union that compelled enslaved men and women to pursue it despite the oppressive condi-

tions that mitigated against it? The answer is perhaps found in the words of black novelist William Wells Brown. In his nineteenth-century novel *Clotel*, Brown says this of the enslaved determination to be married:

Although marriage . . . is a matter which the slaveholders do not think is of any importance . . . it would be doing that degraded class an injustice, not to acknowledge that many of them regard marriage as a sacred obligation and show a willingness to obey the commands of God on this subject. Marriage is, indeed, the first and most important institution of human existence . . . It is the most intimate covenant of heart formed among mankind [*sic*]; and for many persons the only relation in which they feel the true sentiments of humanity.⁹

Two things immediately stand out in Brown's observations regarding the enslaved views of marriage. First, black people's tenacity to be "married" despite the obstacles imposed by the rule of slavery, witnessed not primarily to their need to conform to white cultural/social conventions, but rather to their desire to affirm before God and community the sanctity of their intimate relationships. At stake was not so much the propriety of their marriages as the sacredness of their loving relationships. Such an emphasis on the sacredness of relationships was perhaps informed by an African theological heritage that stressed the theological significance of maintaining loving harmonious relationship with one another as a reflection if not a response to the harmonious relationship that God maintains with all of creation. To be sure, the enslaved determination to be married suggests the theological foundation for discerning the Church's response to same-sex marriages is the sanctity of *loving relationality*.

Any appreciation for what it means for human beings to be created in the image of God and thereby to reflect that image must begin with the imperative to engage in loving relationship with one another. The Genesis creation narrative puts it thus: "So God created humankind in [God's] image, in the image of God [God] created them male and female [God] created them" (Genesis 1:27). What is made clear in this creation account is that human beings are not meant to live in solitary existence, but to live relationally. In this regard, the emphasis is not on the biological creation of male and female but on the existential creation of human relationship. What is made clear in the creation of male and female is that the fullness of one's humanity is to be found in loving relationship. Perhaps that which the Church

must fundamentally affirm, is that which many enslaved men and women apparently understood: the sacredness of loving relationality. The theological imperative of human creation is not for men and women to categorically conform to social/historical contrivances of marriage but for them to adhere to what it means to be *imago Dei*. Given this, the Church has an absolute obligation to nurture and to provide a space for loving relationality, regardless of its sexual identity.

The second issue that stands out in Brown's observation concerning enslaved responses to marriage is his emphasis on their humanity. Clearly, marriage for the enslaved was a marker of their very humanity. As Brown put it, "it is . . . the only relation in which they feel the true sentiments of their humanity." The implication for the Black Church community is clear. If Black Church people are to take seriously the meaning of their own history of struggle for their humanity, particularly as that struggle was informed by their faith, then they must realize the justness of non-heterosexual women's and men's struggle for full affirmation of their humanity. Most importantly, as Black Church people witness to a God who enters into *compassionate solidarity* with the black oppressed in the struggle for their humanity. Just as God has revealed God's self on the side of black people as they strive toward freedom and justice, so is God on the side of non-heterosexuals as they do the same. Rev. Kelvin Calloway, pastor of the Second A.M.E. Church in Los Angeles, perhaps best described the mandate for the Black Church when he said, "Oppression is oppression is oppression . . . Just because we're not the ones who are being oppressed now, do we not stand with those oppressed now? This is the biblical mandate. That's what Jesus is all about."

In this regard, black people's demand that those in the gay and lesbian struggle for justice respect their history of struggle—that is, the significance of the civil rights movement—does not mitigate the need for the Black Church community to recognize the parallels between white cultural contempt for them and heterosexist contempt for non-heterosexual persons. Just as white racist culture has historically refused to admit the humanity of black women and men, and thus has variously denied that black people are created in the image of God, so, too, does heterosexist culture repudiate the humanity of non-heterosexual men and women and thereby implicitly disavow that they, as non-heterosexuals, are created in the image of God. Once again, Black Church people must recognize the similarity between white racism and heterosexism, even as heterosexism is

perpetuated within the black community itself. It is in this way that, even though black people may be unable to acknowledge the gay and lesbian struggle as a civil rights issue, they must admit it as a “human rights” issue. As such, the Black Church community is obliged by its own faith affirmations to affirm the divine worth and sacred rights accorded to all human beings: life, dignity, and the freedom to live out their full potential as divinely created beings. Most significantly, again in accordance with black people’s own history of struggle, these sacred rights include the privilege to marry.

Black people must reclaim their own faith heritage that maintains the sanctity of the body and thereby recognizes that true salvation is not simply about what happens to the soul, but also what happens to the body. In other words, there is a significant black faith tradition that has historically recognized that soul salvation means nothing less than bodily freedom. This is what pulsates through the sung testimony of the enslaved found in the spirituals. As we know, the spirituals maintained in their hidden and coded language the connection between heavenly salvation and earthly freedom. That is, enslaved men and women testified in song to the urgency to save their souls while simultaneously singing about the urgent need to free their bodies. The spirituals point to a faith tradition that did not readily admit soul/body splits but maintained the inextricable connection between the two. Such a tradition suggests a response to a platonized Protestant Puritan tradition that is characterized by body/soul splits. To be sure, it is only in reclaiming its own non-platonized religious heritage that I believe that the Black Church will become more consistent and equitable in responses to matters of sexuality.

The problem of homophobia/heterosexism, particularly same-sex marriages, within the Black Church community is a complicated one. Yet, regardless of the complexity of the matter, it is one that the Black Church must address. It is, to be sure, time for the Black Church to truly live into its justice affirming social, political, historical, and theological tradition, and, therefore, to eradicate any manifestation of the sin of homophobia/heterosexism from its very midst.

Notes

- 1 This study is cited by Religious Tolerance.org: Longitudinal U.S. Public Opinion Polls Same-Sex

- Marriage and Civil Unions (religioustolerance.org/hom_poll5.htm) 4. It should be noted that various polls are constantly being conducted with some suggesting that the gap in opinion between that of the overall population and that of African Americans is closing. For instance, a study later in November 2003 revealed that opposition to same-sex marriage within the general population had grown to 59 percent, even as the African American population remained steady at about 60 percent. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Religious Beliefs Underpin Opposition to Homosexuality,” November 2003 (<http://people-press.org/reports/display7.php3?PageID=765>; accessed June 28, 2005).
- 2 This church was featured on the July 16, 2004 episode of *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, (episode 746) titled “Black Churches and Gay Marriage.” Covenant was highlighted as a church that not only welcomes gay and lesbian persons but also performs same-sex marriage blessings.
- 3 In November 2003 Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest, was consecrated as ninth Episcopal Diocesan Bishop of New Hampshire.
- 4 It should be noted that at the Third International Conference on Afro-Anglicanism held in Toronto, Canada, from July 20 to 27, 2005, an accord was agreed upon that addressed, among several issues, the topic of human sexuality. In regard to sexuality the accord states: “We have wrestled with deep sincerity with the complex issues of human sexuality. . . . The vast differences of approach have been evident in our dialogue. Nevertheless, we have not departed from the sacred truths of our common humanity. We have all been created in God’s image. God’s compassion and love are extended to all whom God has created. . . . We yearn together for the day when the human body will become the symbol, and source, and sacrament of unity among us and no longer a cause of division or an instrument of strife.”
- 5 See Alice Walker’s four-part definition in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.
- 6 Womanist theologian Katie G. Cannon coined this term, “debunk,” as she has spoken on various occasions of the womanist task to “debunk” the methods and notions of white patriarchal ethical and theological systems.
- 7 See my discussion of this in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll and New York: Orbis Books, 1999).
- 8 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, xi.
- 9 William Wells Brown, *Clotel or the President’s Daughter: A Narrative of a Slave’s Life in the United States* (1853), (St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 83.

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