

We Have Better Stories To Tell: Revitalizing Black Religion

*by the Rev. Dr. Scotty J. Williams
United Nations' Permanent Forum on People of African Decent
In collaboration with the Pan African Women's Association of Switzerland
Maison Internationale des Associations à Genève.
Geneva Switzerland, 04.12.2022*

As a pastor and theologian who works in Black religion, I am often invited to worship services with Black and African music. Each time I go I always end up disappointed, for the people fail to understand the heart of Black religion. You see, the organizers think that our faith is only about survival, or coping with injustices and burdens of oppression. They think that our songs and prayers are recipes for happiness, or a therapeutic “pick me up” to lift a broken spirit. They also think that our priests, imams, and spiritual leaders can only offer messages for how to deal with racism. In short, they see our spiritual life as all about Black pain, but the truth is that at its center is heart beating with joy.

Now for people of African descent joy is not a feeling. Instead, it is way of life that is driven by a radical hope. Joy is living with the knowledge that, as we Black Americans say, “Trouble don’t last always”, and holding firm to the conviction that trouble is not our destiny. PLO Lumumba often says that though Africa and its Diaspora have been victimized, we must never think that victimhood is our ultimate identity.

Yes, we have been oppressed, but oppression is not the final word.

Yes, we have been broken, but brokenness is not the final word.

Yes, we have been colonized, but colonialism is not the final word.

And yes, there is pain in our human experience, but pain is not the final word.

Indeed, joy declares that trouble is not our destiny, and this is the heart of Black religion in all of its forms and traditions. But for some reason at present this joy has somehow been eclipsed, and Black religion is starting to be seen as a useless liability. For example, in my work as a public theologian, I often meet millennials and Gen Zers of African descent who are walking away from faith. They seem to have the same outlook as the people who invite me to the services mentioned earlier. They see our spirituality as a mere coping mechanism for dealing with oppression.

Not too long ago, one young Brotha asked me:

When will stop praying to be saved?

When will we stop trusting in something that isn't working, and work to save ourselves?

What will be the catalyst to move us into action?

And not just our people in Africa, but our people around the world?

When I heard this question, I found myself shocked and disheartened, because this was not the case for me when I was this young Brotha's age. Growing up, Black religion was a source

of great encouragement that grounded me in who I was with a host of powerful stories. And when I say stories I am not just speaking of holy books, but stories that pushed back the narrative that being Black was a liability. In the Church, mosques, and temples in my neighborhood, I heard stories of a time before slavery and legends of ancient empires and cities like Songhai and Timbuktu. I learned that our folktales, such as Brer Rabbit, came from Africa, and that certain words that we used (e.g., gumbo and okra) were African words that had been handed down for centuries. Furthermore, I heard stories filled with power in the present of Black people doing things in the here and now that brought honor to our people.

Black religion gave me a sense of pride and showed me another destiny, and it said, “No matter what society tells you, you are not a victim”. It showed me that Blackness was not a synonym for oppression, and it provided a space where I could talk about Blackness and God independent of topics such as White Supremacy.

Last year Ekemini Uwan, a fellow Black public theologian, said this at a conference:

I resent the fact that we have to have a conversation about White Supremacy in conversation with Black Christianity [...]. I am tired of talking about White people, White Supremacy, and Whiteness

Her words resonated with me and reminded me of my childhood, because in Black religion I could lay down the burdens of Black Pain and the narratives of victimhood. I could find and experience the joy that is its heart which leads to radical hope, and that radical hope was a catalyst that moved me to do more than just pray. It moved me, in the words of St. James, to match my faith with works or to not make affirmations without actions. It moved me to the do the things that that young Brotha I mentioned was longing and calling

Again, somehow the joy of Black religion has been eclipsed, and I believe that the reason for this is that we have stopped telling, as Ekemini Uwan puts it, better stories. We have settled for narratives that are not in our best interest, from those of struggle and survival to those stories that make us chase a selfish prosperity that divides us. The truth is that Black religion leads to healing and thriving, and it calls all people of African descent to come together in unity and love. We must get back to the narratives that tell us who we are, and inspire us to do good works for the wellbeing of each other.

We must tell the better stories of our past, or the time before us, where previous generations knew more than troubles such as slavery. Even in these troubles they enjoyed the blessing of this world; they got married, raised family, ate good food, and laughed with genuine delight. They also knew the Divine as more than just a comforter for problems, or helper, rock, and shelter for the storms. In the past there was a time before colonialism and White Supremacy, where people of African descent spoke of God and themselves without referencing oppression. They practiced their different faiths without the fear of the judgment, and called the Divine by different names without the languages of Europe. We must talk about that time when pain was not emphasized in our experience, and the goal of our spiritual life was not fighting the ills that we face today.

In addition to stories of the past, there is also the present, and we must speak boldly of the here and now and the wonders it resents to us. Yes, there are tragic things like the deaths of George Floyd and Brianna Taylor, or divisions among us like the conflict between Somalis and Somali Bantus. Nevertheless, there are better stories happening before our eyes, and we

are writing these stories through good works that match faith with works and affirmations with actions. We are also putting aside the narrative of oppression, and speaking of God and ourselves independent of pain and struggle. For example, there are Millennials and Gen Zers decolonizing Christianity and Islam, and rediscovering spiritual traditions from Africa that were demonized. We are seeing Blackness not as a liability or a curse, but, in the words of Marcus Garvey, as a blessing from God to be grateful for. At present we are finding new visions of the Divine that help us to love ourselves and each other, and in the process we are finding joy and radical hope for the future.

If Black religion is to recover its heart and be relevant to Black people today, if it is to be revitalized, then we all, from spiritual leaders to worshippers, must tell the better stories. We must know more than the better stories of our particular faiths, and must know the stories of all spiritual traditions in Africa and its Diaspora. Those of us who follow Indigenous faiths, like Odinala and Santeria, should know and proudly share the stories of Islam and Christianity. And those of us who are Christians and Muslims should share the stories of Indigenous faiths and proudly tell the truth about them that is often misunderstood.

We can still disagree on doctrines and perspective, but we have to know about one another and use our words for building up. Additionally, we must also know the better stories outside of religion, and speak into different facets of life such as economy, technology and medicine

So in closing this message I encourage us to tell the better stories, and in so doing reveal that the heart of Black religion is joy. Though oppression is a reality it is not the totality of the Black experience, and our spiritual life gives us a radical hope that says pain is not the final word. The final word for Africa its Diaspora is thriving in a broken world, and being a way by which God brings healing to the troubles of other people groups. You see, the joy of Black religion is that it goes beyond Black people, and it gives hope to others and tells them that pain is not their final word.

If we want all of this we must tell the better stories, and I pray that we would do so for our sake and the sake of the world. And my ultimate prayer is that when future generations speak of us, they would find in our lives better stories to tell that bring them joy and radical hope.