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Sana Loue

Understanding Theology and Homosexuality in African American Communities



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Preface

The African American church is widely recognized as a critical and influential institution within U.S. African American communities (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). Indeed, “religion has played a role in Black America that is considerably more holistic and effectual than its more segmented role in most white communities” (Wilmore 1989, xv). It has been estimated that 70 % of African Americans are members of a church (Billingsley and Caldwell 1991), 80 % of all African Americans belong to a faith tradition (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1999), and 97 % of all African Americans claim some form of religious affiliation (Dawson et al. 1994).¹ The African American church has been referred to as “the spiritual ark” that has both supported and empowered its adherents socially, psychologically, and physically through eras of trauma and hardship (Ward 2005, 494).

Despite this frequent portrayal of the church as the bedrock of the African American community, it has been the target of significant criticisms due to its condemnation and ostracism of self-identified gay men and lesbian women (Faraje-Jones 1993; Griffin 2006; Monroe 2001; Sneed 2010). Some scholars have pointedly asserted that “scripture is often the cornerstone of homophobia in the black community” (Douglas 1999, 90), that the African American church has played a major role in the genesis and perpetuation of “theologically-driven” homophobia (Ward 2005, 494), and that the “denigration and symbolic assault on homosexuals” by many African American churches has become a “theological ritual” (Lemelle and Battle 2004, 47). In making such charges against the Black church, it is important to note that this intolerance does not characterize all Black churches, all Black clergy, or all Black congregants. Indeed, there exists significant diversity among Black churches in terms of their size, their style of worship, their interpretation of scripture, and the demographic characteristics of their congregants and their members (Douglas 2003, 33). Nevertheless, many Black denominations have explicitly condemned homosexuality and marginalized gay and lesbian congregants (Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Sanders 1998), including the African Methodist Episcopal; African Methodist-Episcopal Zion; Christian Methodist Episcopal; National Baptist Church, USA, Inc.; National Baptist Church of America; National Progressive Baptist Church; and the Church of God in Christ (Griffin 2006). Indeed, one African American minister announced that he would march with the Ku Klux Klan to protest laws that would give lesbians and gays equal rights (Smith 1994, 128).

The few empirical investigations that have examined the basis for the apparent exclusionary and hostile attitudes toward homosexuals and homosexuality have consistently found an association with church attendance. Herek and Capitano (1995) found from their telephone interviews with a probability sample of 391 Black heterosexual adults that respondents who attended religious services frequently were more likely to display negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Negy and Eisenman (2005) concluded from their study of 70 African American and 140 White university students that African Americans displayed greater homophobia and homonegativity compared with their White counterparts and that this increased level of homophobia and homonegativity was associated with greater frequency of church attendance. Lemelle and Battle (2004), using data from the 1993 National Black Politics Study, examined the relationship between attitudes toward homosexual men and respondent age, church attendance, educational level, household income, and urban residency. They found that the more frequently respondents attended church, the less favorable were their attitudes toward homosexual men (Battle and Lemelle 2002, 136; Lemelle and Battle 2004, 45). The authors further suggested that African American church attendance may “serve as a major medium of ‘moral’ indoctrination condemning homosexuality” (Lemelle and Battle, 2004, 42). In yet another study that utilized data from four major series of surveys, researchers reported that African Americans were more likely than Whites to believe that same-sex relations are always wrong and that gays deserve AIDS as “God’s punishment” for their immoral sexual behavior (Lewis 2003, 63, 75).

It has been suggested that the homophobia of the African American church has led to the stigmatization of non-heterosexual African American men. That stigma is evident on the three dimensions: the bodily, the moral, and the tribal (Goffman 1986, 1–16). Horace Griffin, a well-known Professor of pastoral theology, commented on the damaging consequences of this dynamic:

The present message of homosexuality as immoral creates an inescapable feeling of unworthiness and low self-esteem in African American lesbians and gay men. The continued antihomosexual attitude creates a climate of denial that can develop into rage and hostility by those who experience psychic pain ... heterosexual family members have estranged and disowned responsible and caring lesbian and gay family members simply because they consider them perverse and sinful individuals... (Griffin 2001, 119–120).

These observations necessarily raise significant issues: Is there a legitimate theological basis for the “theologically driven” homophobia? This question demands an examination as to whether same-sex sexual relations were considered to be unacceptable/deviant at the time specified scriptural passages were composed. Has male–male sex become conflated with homosexual identity in the African American church or are they distinct? What is the process through which homosexuality has become so stigmatized in the African American church? Is the apparently prevailing church-based hostility toward homosexuals and homosexuality subject to transformation and, if so, by what mechanism(s)? And, importantly, how can mental health providers assist their non-heterosexual African American clients, as well as families and communities, to heal wounds and bridge differences?

These issues are examined in the chapters that follow, using deviance theory as a framework. Deviance theory allows us to understand better the process through which societies characterize and label particular subgroups and individuals and how those labeled subgroups and individuals then label themselves and others. It is argued here throughout these chapters that African Americans have to varying degrees been consistently labeled by the larger American society—through action, law, and writing—as deviant and deficient. This characterization is particularly notable in depictions of African American sexuality and gender role. In turn, many African Americans, particularly through their churches, strived to overcome these derogatory stereotypes and depictions. These efforts by African Americans to reimagine and redefine African Americans have frequently, however, led to the denigration and isolation of same-sex oriented individuals. Many African American churches, in particular, have adopted and promoted this view of same-sex oriented persons as deviant, using scripture as the basis for their admonitions and denunciations.

Deviance theory suggests that deviance is not an inherent quality and persons are not per se deviant. Rather, deviance “is created by society” (Becker 1963, 8); it is a quality that is conferred upon individuals by others and persons come to be defined as deviant by others (Kitsuse 1962, 248). As such,

deviance may be conceived as a process by which the members of a group, community, or society (1) interpret behavior as deviant, (2) define persons who so behave as a certain kind of deviant, and (3) accord the treatment considered appropriate to such deviants (Kitsuse 1962, 248).

Accordingly,

the critical variable in the study of deviance is the social *audience* rather than the individual *person*, since it is the audience which eventually decides whether or not any given action or actions will become a visible case of deviation (Erikson 1962, 308; italics in original).

Deviance theory as a framework to examine homosexual behavior and homosexuality suggests that (1) specified behaviors are “sex appropriate” and others are “sex-inappropriate,” (2) behaviors are unambiguously prescribed, (3) deviations from those prescribed behaviors are interpreted as immoral, and (4) individuals defined and identified by others as homosexual are to be accorded the treatment considered appropriate for those who engage in “sex-inappropriate” behaviors (Kitsuse 1962, 249–250). The establishment of a recognizable threshold between what is to be considered permissible and impermissible behaviors permits the construction of a class of stigmatized individuals—deviants—and the demarcation in society between what is “pure” and what is not (McIntosh 1986, 182). Further, one’s identity as a homosexual—a deviant—arises not from the performance of the designated sex-inappropriate behaviors themselves (“primary deviance” according to labeling theory, an offshoot of deviance theory), but rather from the reactions of others’ to those behaviors, the resulting response of the individual to others’ reactions, and the individual’s internalization of the categorization (“secondary deviance”) (Epstein 1987, 16).²

A Marxian approach to deviance theory further elucidates the process by which deviant status is imputed to specific groups or individuals. Those who are characterized as deviant are most frequently members of groups that are in some way problematic for those who hold relatively greater power (Fitch 2002, 469; Spitzer 1975, 639; cf. Ericson 1975, 28), reflecting “the priorities of the control system [that] are part of a broader social conflict” (Spitzer 1975, 639). Deviant status is imputed to these groups by those holding greater power as a means of addressing the perceived problem. This control is institutionalized through family, church, associations, schools, and the state. According to Marxian theory of deviance, a critical evaluation of deviant categories demands an examination of the source of such categorization, what it reflects about the priorities and structure of a particular society, and how it relates to class conflict within that society (Spitzer 1975, 639–641). The exercise of power by the powerful serves not only to control the less powerful, but also to define “the relations, the contexts, and the conditions of possibility that create the powerful and less powerful” (Fitch 2002, 469). The once almost universal characterization across all domains of human enterprise of Blacks and Black sexuality as deviant serves as a potent illustration of this dynamic.

The attempt of one writer, who self-identified as “a Negro Faggot,” to explain the basis for the homophobia within African American communities, unknowingly lends credence to the idea that deviance is a creation of the observer and serves to create and/or preserve power, Riggs (1991, 390–391) observed,

What lies at the heart, I believe, of Black America’s pervasive cultural homophobia is the desperate need for a convenient Other within the community, yet not truly of the community—an Other on which blame for the chronic identity crises afflicting the Black male psyche can be readily displaced; an indispensable Other that functions as the lowest common denominator of the abject, the baseline of transgression beyond which a Black Man is no longer a man, no longer Black; ...Blacks are inferior because they are not white; Black gays are unnatural because they are not straight. Majority representations of both affirm the view that Blackness and Gayness constitute a fundamental rupture in the order of things, that our very existence is an affront to nature and humanity.

There exists overlap between an inquiry premised on deviance theory and a poststructuralist approach. Like deviance theory, poststructuralism challenges the assumption that individuals are creators of themselves and their social worlds. Instead, individuals constitute but one part of a complex network of social relations whose social identities result from the ways in which knowledge within those networks is organized (Namaste 1994, 221). The convergence of these two approaches can be seen in Foucault’s observation that despite the longstanding existence of homosexual practices, the classification of “homosexual” did not exist prior to the characterization of such practices by psychiatry as perverse (Foucault 1980, 101) and the concomitant transformation of those engaging in deviance into deviants:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology.... Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (Foucault 1980, 43).

And, just as deviance theory suggests that deviance cannot be explicated without a reference to normality and vice versa, poststructuralism similarly argues that meaning is established through reference to difference, what Derrida has referred to as “supplementarity.”

which is *nothing*, neither a presence nor an absence, is neither a substance nor an essence of man [sic]. It is precisely the play or presence and absence, the opening of this play that no metaphysical or ontological concept can comprehend (Derrida 1976, 244; italics in original).

The opening chapter traces African American history and explores the characterization of African Americans as deviant, particularly with respect to issues related to sexuality. The continuing portrayal of African Americans as deviant, it is asserted here, has sensitized African Americans as a group to charges of deviance, particularly as these charges relate to sexual mores. This sensitization, it is argued, has predisposed many in the African American communities to view differentness—in this case homosexuality—as unacceptable at best and, worse, as sinful and abnormal. Chapter Two explores the themes of revelation and liberation in African American history, focusing on the transformation of the God of Whites to a Black God, the liberation of Blacks from slavery and beyond, and the principles underlying liberation theology are explored in this chapter. These themes are also examined in the context of African American culture. Chapter Three focuses on seven scriptural passages traditionally relied upon within African American churches (and others) to characterize same-sex relations as sinful and/or to exclude homosexuals from church participation. These passages, often referred to as “texts of terror” by those critical of their segmented and noncontextual use for this purpose, are examined as they may have been understood at the time of their writing and as they are currently understood within African American exclusionary churches. The final two chapters address the role of the mental health provider working with non-heterosexual African American clients (Chap. 4) and families and communities that may be struggling to understand their loved ones and their neighbors (Chap. 5).

Finally, this text is in no way intended to essentialize either the experiences of African Americans generally, non-heterosexual African Americans, or African American churches and their clergy. It is recognized that the experiences of individual, families, and communities within the African American population may vary significantly and, even when somewhat similar in nature, may be interpreted and understood by individuals and communities in highly divergent ways. However, the issues that serve as the focus of this are sufficiently common to necessitate their examination and impact.

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