CHAPTER 18

Christianity, Ethnicity and Diaspora

African American Christianity

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Introduction

This chapter will provide a historical overview of African American Christianity, beginning with the transition from traditional African religions to Christianity during the period of slavery. The roles of the First and Second Great Awakenings in the conversion of enslaved Africans and the development of the ‘Invisible Institution’ or religious gatherings of slaves will be examined. Black churches emerged as the most independent and coherent institutions from slavery. They were the dominant institutions in many black communities, involved not only with worship and spirituality but also in economics, politics, education and other concerns of those communities. They provided the leadership and played important roles in the Abolitionist and Civil Rights movements. Black churches and African American missionaries were important in spreading Christianity in missions to Africa and the Caribbean. The historical overview will be followed by a focus on contemporary black churches. Sociological studies and polling data will provide evidence for the strengths and weaknesses of black churches and clergy. Contemporary trends will be examined such as the spread of a neo-Pentecostal movement among the black middle-class and the growth of black mega-churches. The most important trends are the deep faith and beliefs of African Americans as the most religious group among all Americans and the Black Church as a therapeutic community.1

Christianity and Slavery

The Atlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery in the United States were rooted in the pursuit of economic gain. The Africans were pursued, captured,
and enslaved solely for the cheap labour they could provide on farms and plantations. They were the economic tools for the system of chattel slavery that reduced human beings to forms of property. In the beginnings of the economic development of the colonies, race was not the primary consideration since even white indentured servants and Native Americans were tried out as slaves (Lacy 1972: 9–22). However, the economic calculus of the colonists finally settled upon the Africans as the most efficient prospects for enslavement because they were strong and durable, able to withstand the hot summers and malaria of the South, distant from effective security systems of their own people, and above all, they had distinctly visible physiologies, their black skin and African features, which contrasted sharply with the Euro-American norm. Moreover, the supply of Africans seemed inexhaustible. Inevitably, physical phenomenology—the fact that Africans looked different from their white masters—became the basis for the intertwining of race and economics and the development of a racial caste system in the United States.

For almost the first hundred years of slavery only some Africans were converted to Christianity due to the fears of white slave masters that conversion would lead to freedom. Most Africans had to rely on their traditional African religions to survive. Religion also became another reason why Africans were good candidates for enslavement because they were pagan and not Christian (Raboteau 1978: 4–91). However, the colonial legislatures of Virginia and Maryland passed laws in the 1660s and later that made Africans slaves for life (‘durante vita’); intermarriage was forbidden; and children born of African mothers were declared bond or freed depending on the status of the mother. Slavery became a condition that was passed from generation to generation. In 1667 Virginia passed a law that said, ‘the conferring of baptism does not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom’ (Mintz 2013). After that assertion a series of laws stripped the African slave of all rights of personality and made colour a badge of servitude. Christian status no longer mattered. The laws also protected slave masters from felony charges if a slave was killed while being punished. Slavery developed into a brutal institution that led to the deaths and beatings of many enslaved Africans.

White Christian theologians and slave masters also used biblical justifications for American slavery. The most popular and prevalent view was ‘the curse of Ham’ or Noah’s curse in Genesis 9: 20–27 where Noah cursed the descendants of Ham and Canaan to be ‘servants of servants’. The curse was held to be definitive proof by Southern Pro-slavery intellectuals that enslavement of black Africans was God’s will. As Haynes has argued, the curse of Ham ‘confirms the centrality of honor in the white Southern mind’ because slavery’s origin occurred in an ‘episode of primal dishonor’ (Haynes 2002: 65–66). New