Black Religions: Many Faiths and Many Forms
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In his classic book, The Souls of Black Folk, which offered keen and lasting insights into the character and condition of the African American community at the turn of the 20th century, W. E. B. DuBois makes the following observation:

"The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a boss, an intriguer, an idealist, - all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it."

As intriguing as this observation is about the fact of the preacher being the preeminent personality in the African American community, his second observation is equally revealing in terms of the forms that this personality has taken over the years. DuBois states:

"The type, of course, varies according to time and place, from the West Indies in the sixteenth century to New England in the nineteenth, and from the Mississippi bottoms to cities like New Orleans or New York."

I want to examine these observations by DuBois in two specific ways. First, I want to examine the reasons why the preacher was the preeminent personality in the African American community at the turn of the 20th century. I want to look at the historical circumstances that were the single largest contributor to this reality. I also want to look at the ways that specific persons who were African American clergy operated within those historical circumstances to establish their profession as the preeminent core of leadership for their people by 1903 when DuBois made his observation. Then I want to explore the extent to which the claims of DuBois remained true as the 20th century has unfolded. Does the preacher remain the preeminent personality in the African American community? Or does his/her status shift and diminish? If that status does diminish as African Americans move through the 20th century, what are the reasons for that shift? Furthermore, what is the new status afforded to the preacher if it can be demonstrated that he/she is no longer the preeminent personality in the African American community? Finally, and to the extent that it can be determined, what group, profession, or personality has arisen, if any, to assume the role of preeminent personality within the African American community that DuBois ascribed to the preacher at the beginning of this century?

The history of the role and status of the African American preacher up to 1903 has largely been written. The names, the events, the achievements are well documented. It is by referring to that available documentation that the claim made by DuBois can rather easily be substantiated. It is a history that has been "written." That is not the case for the African American preacher throughout the 20th century. Even as we come to the end of that century, the story is still unfolding. True enough, books have been and are being written on the subject. But written history is not the oldest or most extensive collection of research materials available to those who want to examine how the preacher has been perceived throughout the 20th century. That distinction falls to the collection of films produced between 1927 and the present that have consistently depicted the character of the black preacher. Thirty films have been identified that allow the status and function of the black preacher to be viewed and analyzed.

These films place the preacher in every conceivable situation so that his/her status and conduct can be seen and measured in a variety of social settings. Preachers are depicted in both rural and urban settings. They are placed in the midst of the great black migration. They are viewed against the backdrop of the rise of cults and sects that would become leadership rivals. They are featured in
films that refer to African Americans who travelled out of the south not only to the northern states, but to the western states as well. We see preachers between the two World Wars. We see them as the status of African Americans changed in the United States after World War II. The preacher is depicted throughout the whole civil rights era. And significant attention is given to the role and perception of the preacher over the last 20 years, as the country in general, and the African American community in particular, has passed through times of urban unrest, inner city blight and decay, and a renewal of ethnic tensions within the country.

The films focus on real life clergy whose actual struggles can be considered. The films also deal with fictional characters who take on certain attributes and engage in particular practices that cause the African American preacher to be viewed through the lens of cynicism, compassion, caricature, or genuine admiration. The films allow us to see and sense the struggles of the preacher internally, within his/her family, within the larger African American community, and as the preacher encounters white society.

What emerges is the impression that the preacher persists as a continuing presence in the African American community. The preacher seems always to be there. But the sense of preeminence no longer seems to be attached to that character. Leadership is increasingly shared with other non-Christian, non-clergy, and non-religious groups and individuals. The message and the values espoused by the preacher are increasingly ignored and dismissed in favor of a more secular worldview. The preacher himself is increasingly depicted less and less as a religious leader actually engaged in specific priestly/pastoral tasks. The preacher evolves first into an aggressive and powerful community activist, then into a publicity-hungry, headline grabbing opportunist, and finally into a caricature of the preacher as con man/clown/crook/corrupted and corrupting, driven by sex and greed and the lust for notoriety. In short, the preacher as depicted in the full range of these films comes out looking like anything but the "preeminent personality" of the African American community.

My hypothesis is that the same set of conditions that led to the preacher becoming the person described by DuBois, when those conditions began to be altered, contributed to the steady and inevitable shift within the African American community toward other forms of leadership and toward other, more secular, world views and lifestyles. This does not mean that the preacher suddenly ceases to be a force within the community. That certainly is not the case. The African American religious institutions remain the single most numerous wholly owned institutions in that community. Preachers from several religious traditions remain prominent within that community by reason of the prominence of the institutions themselves, if not due to the gifts and personality of the preachers. However, prominence is not synonymous with preeminence. No one would challenge that in every African American community across the country there are preachers who enjoy great prominence. The question of the preacher being the preeminent personality within those communities is another matter.

The reasons for the shift from preeminence at the turn of the 20th century to prominence as that century winds to a close is the focus of my investigation. The films that feature African American preachers offer the answers and explanations to this shift in status. My intention is not to reflect on the content of these films in order to comment on the positive or negative depiction of the preacher in a particular film. My purpose is to analyze each film from the perspective of what it tells us about the way that the preacher is or is not presented as the preeminent personality in the African American community. It is my hypothesis that what the films will present, when considered in their entirety, is a character with steadily lessening influence, admiration, and integrity as the 20th century unfolds.

Is the film image distorted? Has the preacher been falsely portrayed on the screen? Do the written materials that have emerged offer another, and more positive impression of the African American preacher than that which has evolved over the nearly 70 years of film portrayals? That
comparison will have to be done as a part of this investigation. I will test not only the film portrayals, but my hypothesis about what can be concluded about the preacher from those portrayals, against what can be learned about the perception of the African American preacher from other sources. I will, therefore, consult with the writings that have emerged around this character from historians, to political scientists, to novelists, to theologians, to those whose views were captured by sociologists who were testing public opinion on this issue. This investigation into the written sources will tell us whether the film history has badly depicted or accurately reflected how the preacher is presently perceived in the African American community.

The central challenge that confronts this investigation is the perception of the relative reliability of films as sources for historical and research and reflection as opposed to documents. Along with artifacts uncovered in an excavation, written materials have been the unchallenged central basis for all historical research. That written body of material may include personal letters, biographies and autobiographies of persons to be investigated, articles and essays in various journals and newspapers, and primary source material and the secondary sources that have arisen around them. It is for that reason, that research has always begun with a bibliography and the shelves of a library.

How does one use films as the basis of a research project? Arthur Schlesinger recognized this problem when he wrote: "some contemporary evidence, because it is absolutely novel in form, poses unprecedented problems both of acceptability and utilization." He acknowledges that historians have developed the methodology to draw upon fiction, drama, and painting as sources for historical research, but not films. And yet, he continues, if there is any art form through which Americans can communicate something to the world that is unique to themselves, film is certainly that form. He says:

"Film is the only art where the United States has made a real difference. Strike the American contribution from drama, painting, music, sculpture, dance, even possibly from poetry and the novel, and the world's achievement is only marginally diminished. But film without the American contribution is unimaginable. The fact that film has been the most potent vehicle of the American imagination suggests all the more strongly that movies have something to tell us not just about the surfaces but about the mysteries of American life."

Schlesinger says "movies have so much to disclose about the inner as well as the outer life of America - if only historians knew how to coax out the deeper meanings." Writing, as he was, a foreword statement for a 1979 book that was attempting to develop a methodology for using films as a basis for research, he called the efforts of those authors "pioneering." The field has not made significant progress in this undertaking since 1979, and so I am attempting to continue the work as yet another pioneer into a virgin field.

While historians object to the use of film as a basis for doing research, many in the field of religion object to the use of film as a format in which to communicate or presume to deduce any valid message about religion or religious characters. This poses another challenge for my approach to doing research about the African American preacher by drawing upon film depictions. Can the actual vocation, viewpoints, and values of the preacher, a decidedly religious character, be portrayed in a film? Can one discern where an earnest representation of the preacher ends, and where the Hollywood entertainment factor begins? Anyone who has seen one of the "epic" movies on some biblical character or episode: (Samson and Delilah, Ten Commandments, The Robe, Quo Vadis, King of Kings, Ben Hur) knows how much entertainment value and imagination has been added to those sacred tales. Why would it be any different in Hollywood's handling of a particular religious character?

The questions are valid, but do not constitute a rational reason to simply ignore film as a potential area of research. The films should at least be viewed and critically analyzed to see what they might yield in terms of understanding about religious characters or themes. As Neil Hurley observes in his book, Theology Through Films:
"Films can no longer be ignored, especially as a significant mode of religious awareness, though they are obviously different from traditional prayer, liturgy, and acts of piety. Those who profess to be dedicated to religious education and theology should acknowledge the universality of the motion picture experience as one of the foundation stones of an emerging world culture." 6

It is not my intention to do my research or writing from the strict perspective of either religious education or theology. My intention is not to examine the sermons, speeches, public conduct, or private behavior of the preachers portrayed in films from the perspective of any particular credo or confession of faith. I want to discern what a particular film suggests about the status and importance of the preacher within the African American community at any given point in time. What the preacher does or does not do that reflects the rituals and/or beliefs of any given faith tradition is not my central concern. How that preacher is perceived and regarded by the community within which he moves and works is what I want to consider. Yet, the question remains valid, and serves as a warning, because in a film made for profit and entertainment, one must always wonder where an actual depiction of a preacher occurs, and where one is simply nothing more than a contrived "performance."

I approach this study with the knowledge that this field is not entirely unexplored by others. Studies have already been done that attempt to examine how a particular profession has been treated over a long period of film history. Not only that, but at least one study has been done, though on a very limited basis, that attempted to analyze the ways in which the African American preacher has been depicted in films, as well as in other entertainment mediums. Finally, one well known film critic has written about the ways in which films have sought to depict white clergy. Drawing upon these sources, I am able to develop a foundation of methodologies and bibliography with which to support my own research interests.

In The Screening of America, Tom O'Brien talks about the ways in which films have managed to both shape and reflect values in this society over the last 75 years. As a part of his work he traces the way in which the profession of "the teacher" has been treated from the 1939 movie, Goodbye Mr. Chips, to the 1990 films, Lean on Me and Dead Poets Society. A remarkable number of films fell into this category, along with two long running TV series. Among them were Annie Hall, Terms of Endearment, Moonstruck, Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Animal House, Teachers, Back to School, Revenge of the Nerds, Children of a Lesser God, The Marva Collins Story, Stand and Deliver, Educating Rita, and Reuben, Reuben. The list could doubtless be expanded since he wrote in 1990. 7

What O'Brien does is suggest the ways in which the profession of the teacher is either celebrated or criticized, how the person who portrays the teacher is either a highly principled person or a deeply flawed individual. He looks to see if the collection of films points to a national appreciation for teaching and education, an attempt to view schools and teachers as authority figures to be rebelled against, or as well meaning stuffed shirts, as in School Ties, who actually reflect all of the bigotry and lack of personal honor about which they spend so much time speaking. O'Brien ends up regretting the ways in which teachers and the importance of teaching are presented in the films he reviewed. While he was not asking my specific question, he was employing something of the methodology I intend to use; how a particular character has been depicted over a long period of time in film history.

The study of the black preacher and his depiction in films was touched upon by H. Beecher Hicks, in his book, Images of the Black Preacher. In that book, he seeks to identify the negative images attached to African American preachers that were presented in a limited number of films. He mentions only three films: Cotton Comes to Harlem, Buck and the Preacher; and Uptown Saturday Night. That has proven to be only 10% of the existing body of film materials. It also only sought to reinforce the author's belief that preachers enjoyed a negative perception in the African American community at the time of his writing in 1977. Nevertheless, the role and status of the preacher
has, at least, been studied and evaluated. Much needs to be done to expand upon what Hicks began, but there has been a start to the investigation.8

Finally, Michael Medved has considered how white clergy have been viewed in films in his, Hollywood and America. He argues that Hollywood has strayed far away from the values of the vast majority of the people, not just in the country, but in the movie going public as well. As proof for his point, he says that films continually cheapen things which that public happens to cherish, with religion being one of those things. In a section that he has entitled, “Comic Clergy,” he points to films that have treated white clergy in less than affirming ways. He mentions such films as Agnes of God, Monsignor, Heaven Help Us, We’re No Angels, and The Godfather Part III. To that list he could have added Elmer Gantry and his more recent film, Leap of Faith.9

What this reveals, is that a path does exist by which my particular research interest can proceed. Literature and methodology are in place for studying the way in which a particular character/profession has been depicted over time; the teacher. Literature and methodology are in place to see how the African American preacher in particular has been depicted. And literature and methodology are in place to view the way in which white clergy of several faith traditions have also been viewed over the years.

What remains for me, is the process of critiquing each of my 30 films, testing my own hypothesis about the shift from preeminence to prominence, and then comparing the findings from the films with what is to be found in the literature that discusses the role and status of the African American clergy. It is a project and a process that offer great possibilities for research into one of the most interesting characters to have arisen in United States history in general, and in the life of the African American community in particular.

Notes

4. Ibid; p. x.
5. Ibid; pp. xi-xii.