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Reconstructing Religion in the Post-Civil War Era

Writing Process

After learning about the Civil War and Reconstruction in ASI 120, we were assigned with the task of choosing a topic within this time period to research and identify connections or variance in sources and interpretations. After receiving approval for the topic of the Black Church in Reconstruction, I began creating an annotated bibliography with suggested sources from various time periods to ensure differing views and opinions among authors. I provided a summary for each source and separated them into two groups depending on each view or interpretation. This was continued in the final historiography portion in which I elaborated on each source and drew connections between all the sources and authors.

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Reconstructing Religion in the Post-Civil War Era

Jordan McCormick

During Reconstruction, both blacks and whites struggled to establish stable ground on which they could rebuild their lives following the Civil War. Religion and the establishment of the black church was one way African Americans sought to redefine themselves. They transitioned from the plantation church of slavery to white churches and, eventually, many made their way to the freedom of black churches where they could practice their faith in their own way. In the dawn of freedom, the black church provided African Americans a sense of autonomy in which they could take up leadership roles and assert their independence in the world despite doubts of whites of the time. The sources provided within this historiography have been grouped categorically to explore the various impacts of the black church on the African American community during the Reconstruction era. The first group of sources examines the idea that the black church had a negative effect on blacks' development within their communities. The second group looks at how the black church led to the advancement of blacks within their communities and is characterized by hope and achievement. As religion is still a prevalent issue today, it is important to look at origins and the foundation for those concepts. Historians suggest the African American community has been shaped by religion and faith both negatively and positively. By understanding the patterns and characteristics of the black church and formation days of Reconstruction, we may gain insight about African American communities today. Although historians have interpreted this topic differently over the years, each of these sources support the idea that the black church was a marked change in the African American community as it brought attention to newly freed slaves who began to rebuild their lives in the wake of the Civil War. I believe the second group of historians provides the best analysis: While difficulties arose with the

formation of the black church, it ultimately allowed more opportunities for African Americans to demonstrate leadership capabilities and develop their sense of identity after the hardships of slavery and severe discrimination.

Moving Backwards

While many historians view the black church as a positive influence on the African American community, some suggest that the church hindered blacks' advancement in society or continued the oppression and discrimination against them. In this sense, the sources in this first group propose ways in which the black church may have negatively affected those involved. John L. Bell, in "Baptists and the Negro in North Carolina during Reconstruction," discusses the idea that African Americans often were not accepted as a normal parishioner or citizen of a church in the same way as whites. As slaves within certain churches were emancipated, there was difficulty in defining their role as newly freedmen. While some Baptist churches continued to share the Gospel mission with blacks, the author points out that often Sunday schools and other services, for example, were used to gain control over blacks. Furthermore, many congregations called for the complete removal of African Americans from their churches to adhere to social inequality already in place from slavery. Blacks stuck in white churches were lowered to only passive roles, especially in worship. As blacks began to start their own churches, whites continued to view them as uneducated and criticized their method of worship. Bell points to how blacks did not flourish with the creation of their own churches as they may have hoped, supporting the category of the black church as a hindrance. Bell argues that the church was, inherently, an institution used by whites to demonstrate their superiority rather than as a tool for black success and independence. Thus, when blacks began their own churches or served as a parishioner, they were degraded so that they would again be equated to the level of a slave. Bell's writing suggests the church further lowered status for African Americans.¹ This source provides the best connection to the characteristics of the second group as it reveals freedmen were degraded back to their original position of slave just by the mere truth of their faith and membership in churches.

The North Louisiana Historical Association's "Refuge in a Hostile White World" addresses the idea that the black church was firstly an established social

¹ John L. Bell, *Baptists and the Negro in North Carolina during Reconstruction* (North Carolina: North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 1965), 391-393, 396-397.

institution for blacks but also an emotional channel in which they could release sorrow and let go of adversity. This source, with the help of Ruby F. Johnson, observes that blacks faced the task of proving their competence in the aftermath of white supervision. This source is different from others in that it suggests blacks may have been expelled from white churches rather than leaving voluntarily. This source mentions that many Negro buildings were used for political meetings and organizations. Because of this, the buildings were an easy target for opposition such as the Ku Klux Klan. Many preachers within the black church were persecuted by the Klan, and many of the buildings were burned down. African American religious thought was negatively affected by fear and the pressure to conform to Republican ideology so as to avoid oppression and harassment. This source suggests ways in which the black church was held back from full success and, therefore, could not fully contribute to the advancement of the black community as a whole. Like Bell's "Baptists and the Negro in North Carolina during Reconstruction," the North Louisiana Historical Association also suggests that oppression was a main shortcoming of the black church. "Refuge in a Hostile White World," in addition, introduces the Ku Klux Klan's role in discrimination during Reconstruction and after many slaves are free. This source demonstrates that the church drew not only positive, but also negative attention from oppressive groups. Thus, African Americans were vulnerable especially in a public setting such as the church where individuals were easily accessible.²

As in the preceding sources, James Melvin Washington discusses the difficulties of implementing religion into the lives of newly freed slaves in his book *Frustrated Fellowship*. His account discusses the integration of education and evangelization. Distrust arose between various black missionary communities, particularly the Home Mission Society and the Southern Baptist Convention. In their new freedom, blacks began establishing their own churches while many white people still held the view that blacks should be reduced to a position of slavery. Furthermore, blacks were distrusted in positions of power or leadership and were seen as a race to be saved through religion rather than as people who help and serve others. Within the black church itself, there were many disagreements as it was composed of both freed slaves and Northern blacks. There were conflicts with religious style as well as disagreements between

² North Louisiana Historical Association, *Refuge in a Hostile White World* (Shreveport: Walsworth Publishing, 1980) 19-24.

Northern and Southern beliefs. Washington's work features not just the difficulties and obstacles that accompanied the establishment of the black church seen in previous sources, but also the criticism that resulted from disagreements within the institution itself. These internal conflicts produced an unstable foundation for the church and contributed to insecure relationships among African Americans themselves. This source supports the category of backward progress especially as the foundation of the African American community itself lacked strength and would be weakened further with tensions in a new establishment such as the church.³

In the "Paradox of Religious Segregation: White and Black Baptists in Western Kentucky, 1855-1900," Christopher Beckham studies whether or not blacks left white churches because they were prohibited within the congregation or because they did not want to accept degradation brought upon them by whites. This writing suggests racism was the main factor resulting in the separation of white and black churches. Beckham recognizes that the black church allowed African Americans to form their own ministry and participate in new opportunities, but it did not advance their position in the community around them. In addition, their faith practices were often looked down upon or considered inappropriate by whites. Looking at religion as a whole, this source suggests that, even in religious conversion, blacks were often not viewed any differently and their status did not change in the eyes of whites, thus supporting this category of no significant advancement in the black community. Beckham's work is similar to John L. Bell's source in that both look at the ways in which the black church was used to revert the position of African Americans back to that of a slave: unfortunate, incapable, etc.⁴

Making Progress

While the first group of authors sees the black church as a hindrance, the second group of sources shows the transition of African Americans from an enslaved people to a dynamic group that is capable and qualified for leadership and the same opportunities as white citizens. These sources describe the various ways in which the African American community did not remain stagnant but was

³ James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986) 55-57, 61-63, 72, 81, 84, 107-109, 114.

⁴ Christopher Beckham, *The Paradox of Religious Segregation: White and Black Baptists in Western Kentucky, 1855-1900* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1999) 306-307, 310, 315-316, 318-319, 321.

transformed and developed through the origins of the black church. Sources and authors falling into this category adopt a more positive outlook of the effects of the church on the development of the African American community.

W.E.B. DuBois provides the earliest interpretative source in his *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. DuBois looks at the establishment of organizations such as the American Missionary Association, an abolitionist group, that aimed to reach and support African Americans in the South especially after slavery. Newly freed, many blacks desired to grow in greater understanding of their faith by reading the Bible, for example. Abolitions and missionary societies, through the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) and the African Colonization Society of New York, assisted in establishing black schools for this reason. Without the help of missionary efforts, many blacks in this time may not have received education. Thus, DuBois investigates the correlation between religious efforts and educational efforts during Reconstruction. This source looks at the overlap between religious and public institutions, suggesting that both support each other. DuBois suggests the black church planted the seeds for the subsequent institutions to be born. In contrast to other sources, he prioritizes looking at the public education institution rather than looking at the internal workings of the black church.⁵

As DuBois focuses on education and the church, Clarence E. Walker also observes subsequent institutions formed after the African American church, but includes commentary on worship practices and leadership aspects within the church. In *A Rock in a Weary Land*, Walker observes the experiences within the A.M.E. Church as it sought to reach both poor and sinful blacks as well as slaves. Through this church, blacks wanted to improve the communal and monetary aspects within their community so as to improve the image of their race in society. In addition, Walker looks at the idea that the A.M.E. Church sought to establish black autonomy and prove to society, especially to whites, that they were not irresponsible or incapable. Members of the church hoped that they could serve as models of self-help and examples of an elevated black community. The hope was that non-members of the church would strive to perform in the same

⁵ W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1935) 77, 637, 642, 645.

way as the middle class or be inspired to join as well. After the Civil War, the church gave freedmen work opportunities to reach success when their freedom was limited. Thus, in leaving the master's church and choosing one of their own, freedmen were able to officially consider themselves active members of the communities they were a part of. The church was a refuge for newly freed slaves, away from, what was considered, the sacrilegious worship of whites. Worship consisted mainly of various dances and songs as well as a type of spirit possession. Much of the laity believed this incorporation of free worship was reminiscent of African American heritage during slavery. This aspect allowed for the re-establishment of black identity torn away from African Americans in the days of slavery.

In regards to church leadership, A.M.E. ministers took up a double leadership role in meeting both the spiritual and temporal needs of their congregation, further establishing African Americans as adequate and capable leaders in their community and in broader society. Through the church, both a university and a newspaper were born in 1848 and 1864, allowing an outlet for black voices and the emergence of more black educators and leaders. Walker clearly outlines the mission of the A.M.E church and the opportunities it afforded blacks, specifically the freedmen. He also shows the development of the church from its establishment all the way to the subsequent institutions born after the church.⁶

In *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya also discuss black leadership in the church as mentioned in Walker's interpretation earlier. In this source, Lincoln and Mamiya touch on the idea that the black church was the prime institution developed by African Americans in the wake of slavery and the Civil War. Both writers suggest that the church, as a leading institution, opened the door for blacks to get involved in local and state politics. Their role as preacher or leader increased their reputation and allowed them to gain more influence. Furthermore, the black church served to increase independence for blacks after slavery and enhance feelings of solidarity and unity. Similar to the previous sources, Lincoln and Mamiya provide examples of institutions established after the black church but go more in-depth in observing the specific leadership roles of blacks within those institutions. The authors also mention that the black church opened the doorway for the

⁶ Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1982) 2, 7, 14-16, 23, 63.

establishment of black-run banks as well as life insurance companies. This source features many examples of development and opportunities for growth with the black church, outside of religious aspects; it is distinct from other sources that only focus on the interior aspects of the black church. This is important to keep in mind that in a community, the African American community in this case, religion will not be the only aspect involved in a successful development. Religion and faith through the black church may have opened the door, but the community also needs the social and political aspects that are brought about after the church.⁷

Similar to Walker's writing on worship within the black church, David McGregor mentions the autonomy gained among blacks in the ability to develop their own style of worship and their own church. In his writing, "The Development and Distinctive Character of the Black Church in the South, from the Beginning of Slavery to the Reconstruction Era," McGregor observes that the independent black churches allowed former slaves to create for themselves a new identity and a new opportunity to express their faith and spirituality. McGregor notes that, under the black church, new religious expressions emerged such as the ring shout, call-and-response, as well as congregational worship. These advancements allowed blacks to be confident in their identity without the fear of discrimination or maltreatment. Thus, the new church served as a refuge away from the hostility of whites and plantation churches blacks experienced in slavery. They established self-sufficiency and leadership in appointing their own church leaders and developing their own form of religious practice. In continuation, the black church assisted in building a more stable foundation for the family. Overall, McGregor's discussion of black churches in the Reconstruction era supports the idea that the new church institution served as empowerment for blacks both individually and on a communal level. This source shows the development of the black community from hardships in plantation churches to improvement of the community with the formation of the independent black church. The author illustrates the success of African Americans as they worked their way from the pain and toil of slavery to leadership roles in their own institution, something unheard of for the time. McGregor focuses more on the success of leadership

⁷ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990) 61-65, 92-93, 111, 122, 205, 244.

within the church; whereas Walker, in the preceding source, observes specific aspects that established the church as a successful institution.⁸

Lincoln and Mamiya mention how the black church increased leadership roles for blacks within the church as well as in other areas such as politics. In “Plans Dat Comed from God: Institution Building and the Emergence of Black Leadership in Reconstruction Memphis,” Armstead L. Robinson looks more specifically at an example of leadership in the post-Civil War era. The life of Reverend Morris Henderson is observed here—a man who bravely sought to start his own church in the aftermath of slavery and the Civil War. Henderson wanted to create a space where freedmen could worship in their own style without the fear of obstruction or restriction by whites. Henderson's example shows a leader committed to institution building and one that can lead both blacks and whites, demonstrated by his example in Memphis. He is glorified in a sense, eliciting the strength similar to Solomon in the Bible and the hope that all newly freedmen can do the same. In his exploration of the black church in Memphis, the author highlights the idea that the church formed the backbone of community living just as it did in slavery. This new church community also provided work opportunities for African Americans. Robinson mentions that the church allowed blacks to be a part of a community outside of the assistance of whites and the government. They could survive and create on their own. Robinson’s source is unique in that he provides an example of a leader who, because of his ardor and bravery, is respected by both blacks and whites in society. This is representative of the advancement of the whole community through great leaders within the church. On an individual level, Rev. Morris Henderson serves as inspiration for the black community as a trailblazer and leader of the church.⁹

In *The History and Heritage of African-American Churches: A Way Out of No Way*, L.H. Welchel expresses the idea that the black church had a positive impact on the development of the black community. Welchel claims that the church was the first institution African Americans could fully call their own. The administration of the black church allowed for the beginnings of other important institutions such as schools and hospitals which, as Clarence E. Walker

⁸ David McGregor, *The Development and Distinctive Character of the Black Church in the South, from the Beginning of Slavery to the Reconstruction Era* (Bedrock Park: Flinders University History and Politics Society, 1993) 32-36.

⁹ Armstead L. Robinson, *Plans Dat Comed from God: Institution Building and the Emergence of Black Leadership in Reconstruction Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994) 87-90, 101, 109.

mentioned, advances communal and monetary goals. Further, Whelchel makes note that the black church allowed African Americans to establish their independence and autonomy as newly freed slaves. In the creation of their own church, blacks were free to practice in their own religious expressions rather than conforming to standards of white churches. Whelchel supports the idea that the black church promoted certain moral values and a sense of dignity allowing for the growth of the black community by providing standards of living. Therefore, he touches on values and beliefs within the black church that preceding sources did not talk about. This source fits into this category as Whelchel points not only to the success of the black church, but also to the success of other establishments stemming from success of the church within the black community that support the competency and autonomy of African Americans. As in other sources, Whelchel focuses on subsequent institutions that resulted after the church. In contrast, he inserts the point about morality and values being upheld in the community with the creation of the church.¹⁰

Conclusion

The finest interpretation on the issue of the black church in the development of the African American community is found in the second category which underlines ways in which African Americans were assisted in their advancement and progression in society. The sources in “Making Progress” outline achievements in black leadership as well as the establishment of other institutions such as banks and schools in relation to the church. These sources span a vast amount of time with the earliest source being from W.E.B. Dubois in 1935 and the latest from L.H. Whelchel in 2011. Through these years, historians have identified similar characteristics of the black church and how the institution worked towards the improvement of the African American community. African Americans surely experienced setbacks and oppressive forces as they sought to break free of the plantation church and white establishments. Escaping the bonds of slavery that had shackled them for years caused them to be more susceptible to discrimination as they entered society as free people. The achievements far outweigh the costs of building the black church. Each source in the first group portrays a hopeful view of African American communities, during the time, while recognizing they were still in a disadvantaged position as newly freed slaves. This

¹⁰ L.H. Whelchel, Jr., *The History and Heritage of African-American Churches: a way out of no way* (Minnesota: Paragon House, 2011) 2413, 2435, 2449, 2509, 2601, 2738, 2742, 2756.

idea connects with the second group's acknowledging both sides of the issue. The Reconstruction era was marked by a time of influence and advancement seen through the practices and traditions rooted in the African American church that has inspired and contributed to the community we see today. Religion is not just characterized by spiritual practices and beliefs but, as seen in the example of the black church, religion is also an institution-building force and a foundation for subsequent establishments and advancements.

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