

NEGRO CHURCH LIFE

By John R. L. Diggs

The social status of the Negro in America finds its highest expression in the church life of this people. The social philosopher who would make a careful study of the status of the race should by all means have accurate knowledge of its church life which furnishes a perspective through which the better types of race life may be seen.

The Christian church is the largest organization common among these humble people, and because of its very character, it calls forth the best elements in their nature. If, therefore, we consider its power over them from the social point of view only, we shall indeed be repaid; for it is probably beyond question that the church has done more to civilize the black man than any other one agency could have done. Through it the social life of the Negro people finds its highest expression; in it, that life receives form and direction; under its care the moral and social are developed and refined, and to it society owes much for what has been accomplished during the years since 1620.

The character of Negro church life is seen in types of worship. Here we have a most interesting field of study and an almost boundless field of investigation. If the student of economic progress desires to place the results of his investigations beyond serious question, he would, among other things, make a careful study of modern machinery *in actu*. No second hand facts would be satisfactory to the truly scientific spirit of the investigator; for he knows that original investigations made according to scientific methods now in general use would

alone remove many fatal objections. This same spirit is imperatively demanded by the circumstances of the case and this same method must be employed in any satisfactory study of the social life of the colored people of the United States, as expressed in their church functions.

It is perhaps not out of place to hope that some one will come forth in the not remote future who will have the spirit historical as well as the mental and other qualifications, to give the people of America a full and complete study of this great question. For the sake of convenience and clearness we may treat, briefly, three periods clearly defined, in the church life of the American Negro.

(a) The period prior to 1860.

(b) The transition period, 1860-1890.

(c) The period of greatest progress, 1890—.

We shall not be able to present results of original investigation for the first and second periods, entire; for it was during the second period that the writer was born; but by hard work and by the expenditure of some time and care we hope to state some facts in a brief way.

In "Twentieth-Century Negro Literature," Dr. E. M. Brawley, one of the most scholarly men of the present generation, says: "A generation has come since the passing away of the period to which the old Negro belonged, and this generation has lived in the period of the new Negro. Is this Negro an improvement morally upon his father? Zealous friends of the race stoutly maintain that he is; while enemies assert that he is not as good * * * * * His father had no moral

training * * * * * Look over the entire moral code as set forth in the Ten Commandments, and the impossibility of teaching effectively those great truths to slaves—American slaves—becomes apparent. The old enslaved Negro was destitute of true moral training, and very much of what was offered to him as such was nothing more than 'sounding brass' and he knew it and could not profit by it."

The period in question began with the introduction of Negro slavery and continued two hundred and forty-five years. During this period the Christian slave-holders of the South did much to enlighten the dark and benighted beings who were fresh from African savagery; and yet Dr. Brawley's criticism of "very much of what was offered" as mortal training is correct according to the teachings of the history of that time and the monuments of dishonor which that reign of affairs has left us.

We must never forget the great service rendered to civilization by the persons who gave the slaves elementary instruction in the ruder arts of a better life. Many must have been the sacrifices made in order to teach these untutored beings, and the thoughtful descendants of those early blacks will not forget that great, Christianlike service. This great service affected not only the religious life of the Southern people as a whole, but the entire social organization was profoundly modified as a step preliminary to something better. What ever evil we find associated with that earlier American life was largely due to conditions inseparable from the social relations involved, and it seems easier to study those conditions and learn the lessons they teach, than to spend time in criticising a transitory type of civilization so far removed from our own as to make it very difficult to do it full justice. We must not forget that the task of civilizing men is not an easy

one, and that those early Americans did a noble service in winning thousands of men from the thralldom of heathenism.

As the slaves had not forgotten the fetichism of their native land, it was natural for them to mingle some of their ruder forms with the new system of worship observed in, and enjoined upon them, by the Christian church. Though many of the heathen forms were grotesque, as one might in reason expect, the slaves nevertheless held firmly to them as things sacred; and in spite of the care and watchfulness of their owners, these slaves occasionally observed some of these heathen rites and ceremonies. It is to this fact that but little attention has been given by some writers of superstition among Southern Negroes. The strangest forms of worship, now rapidly passing away, have in common something of the African heathen and the American Christian. This worship though crude, desultory, and, in many instances, ineffective, had its power over the social life of the Negroes of America.

During the second period (1860-1890) the colored preacher proper arose. Prior to 1860 the Negroes attended the churches of their owners, occupying the seats especially set aside for them, as a rule. Thus they enjoyed the ministrations of educated clergymen. When the Negroes left these ministrations there was, for a time, a retrogression in their worship. This was natural under the circumstances; for they had no trained men to lead them and to instruct them in the better ways of worship.

About 1866-67 the various missionary organizations of the American churches began their work of educating preachers and teachers for the newly enfranchised millions of immortal souls; to this end schools were established, and by 1875 a number of fairly well trained men entered the

pulpits. After about ten years' service a great change was wrought in the church life of the colored people of the South, superstition began to lose some of its power, fine churches were erected and the number of enrolled members largely increased. In the midst of much that one deeply regrets, there is the excess of good over evil. This is the chief ground of hope for the future; it is the ground of the Christian philanthropist's faith in the ultimate regeneration of the race.

During this thirty years (1865-1895) the church led in the creation and development of a higher ideal of home life, and this leadership is exerting a tremendous power in transforming the life of the race. Here we have a great power making for law, order, industry and righteousness. The altruistic spirit is awakening; the welfare of the home, the community, the State and foreign lands is a matter of deep concern and interest. It is not true that these churches are interested only in themselves, for their interest in mankind is seen in the mission work they aid in supporting.

Whatever the Negro race has gained in the race of life—real gain—must, in a large measure, be attributed to the power exerted over that people by the Christian church. Since the advent of the colored preacher, though with limited training, the Negroes have gained in wealth and intelligence. To these leaders is due the credit for the great advances made in the acquisition of property, real and personal, since 1875. The Northern missionary and educational societies made the trained Negro preacher possible, and thereby, paved the way for what has been done by the colored ministry.

The third period may begin in 1890. During the last decade of the nineteenth century a number of men with better preparation for leadership entered the field. They were more deeply impressed with the social signifi-

cance of life; they labored to show that the Christian religion is not at variance with economic and civic progress, that political and social philosophy are not antagonistic to the best religious life, but that these wide spheres of human interest should make their contribution to the welfare of mankind.

As a result of the effort to lead the Negro church to comprehend the social and economic side of its life, and to express this in its aesthetic and economic interest, there is marked improvement, especially in the South. It is, however, a matter of sincere regret that more than five millions have not been reached by this helpful power; for the work of educating and Christianizing has not kept pace with the increase of the population. The very thought of it is appalling—5, 000, 000 unreached by missionary and educational influences, and this in the United States of America!

Under the new leadership the home life of four millions, perhaps, has been so far improved that many generalizations made nowadays, but based on conditions existent a quarter of a century ago, are far from accurate. One must have visited typical Negro homes, and a large number of them, within the last ten years, in order to speak wisely concerning their home life. Many writers who treat some phases of the so-called Negro question are strangers to even the alphabet of the cultured home life of thousands of refined people of this black America.

We must remember that these refined and enlightened colored people are not wealthy, and though they do much for the spread of a higher civilization, they have, in the unreached four or five millions of their unfortunate fellows, a burden greater than they can as yet bear. We must somehow keep pace with the growth in population. This has not been done

during the last twenty-five years. This condition of affairs is a serious menace to social well-being, and should receive the candid attention of social reformers and philanthropists of every part of our country. It is exceedingly hard for the four millions of Negro people who have been reached by helpful agencies to bear the responsibility for the conduct of five millions of unfortunate creatures whom American philanthropy has allowed to remain unhelped for years. Do we wonder that many criminals are found among them? The rational mind must wonder that the number is not larger. "Man is not a social being as is sometimes said, if by that is meant that every one does instinctively and with pleasure what the common good requires. Every child of the most cultivated parentage requires to be taught what his duties are for he will not know them by instinct; and needs to be trained, controlled, disciplined and helped in to the ways of social co-operation.

The training of the human race for co-operation has been long, difficult and costly. We dare not count on the inheritance of acquired virtues. Science, literature and good morals are taught to each human being and only thus transmitted"* These words of Dr. Chas. Henderson are weighty with wisdom. They ought to be to America what Fichte's words on education and freedom were to that German yeomanry before which the mighty French battallions went down in 1871,—words of inspiration, words setting forth what should be done rather than what is actually being done.

But we must remember that something is being accomplished by the church and that this great organization is a signal success as an amelioration of social power. With a large

number of trained men, such as our higher institutions are preparing for leadership, many more will be reached in the next quarter of a century. Directly or indirectly the church has given us such high grade institutions as Howard University, at Washington, D. C., Va. Union University at Richmond, Va., Fiske University at Nashville, Tenn., and Atlanta University at Atlanta, Georgia, together with several strong theological seminaries like Gammon and the Richmond Theological Seminary, at Atlanta, and Richmond, Va., respectively.

These schools are dedicated to the high and holy cause of training preachers, teachers and other leaders for the enfranchised millions. The Negro Church of today is largely an outgrowth of the labors of men trained in the above named and otherlike institutions. Few men will dare raise any question as to the social influence of the Negro church when they actually grasp the conditions confronting us today.

For it must be remembered that many of the social organizations known among Caucasians are unknown among the Negroes as a rule and their churches and benevolent organizations must serve all purposes for the development of the larger social life. The famous "True Reformers' Organization" with headquarters at Richmond, Va., is an example of an economic-benevolent order. It is under control of Negro Christians, owns and operates a large bank, a large number of grocery stores, a large plantation, an Old Folks' Home, controls some real estate and directs growing interests in many large cities throughout the country.

This vast interest grew up as a direct result of the new social teaching from the Negro pulpit. Rev. W. W. Brown, who may well be classed with men like the Vanderbilts, Goulds, Stewart, Rockefellers, et al for clear

*Dependents, Defectives and Delinquents, p. 254.

sound business sense, was the organizer of this great work. The large attendance of Negro children at public schools South is another result of the same propaganda. The wisest among the colored ministry constantly urge industry, thrift, economy, righteousness and education upon their congregations. For these and other reasons the church exerts great power over the life of the Negro race, and is an agency of no ordinary importance. The Negro has been introduced to at least one phase of American life, a modern civilization, and if the mistake is not made of exalting the so-called industrial type of education at the expense of the equally important type of education under which the present economic and social status has been attained, if the making of the mere bread winner is not prized above the making of men who will earn bread, if the human machine is not developed to the utter neglect of the trained man with all the power of initiative set free, we may expect even greater results secured through that high type which is being slowly but surely developed in the Negro church in the United States of America.

Apart from the merit of Christianity per se, we may affirm its value as a social power in the life of the Negro people; and it is this fact to which we have tried to direct atten-

tion, in a measure. From observation the writer is convinced that the church, through its power has done much to make these people economic, thrifty and altruistic; that the social life of the Christians among them is far superior to that of their unfortunate fellows all about them, but numbers with the millions still unreached.

In view of these facts we appeal to the considerate judgment of all noble hearts for sympathy and support in the training of black men for wise and safe leadership in every sphere of life.

In the "College Bred Negro," Dr. DuBois shows that the black men and women educated in the higher institutions of learning, North and South, are progressive and industrious members of society, and that these people, in nearly every case are found working for the elevation of their fellowmen throughout the Southland. They are the advocates of good will, peace and order.

If a wise philanthropy will see to it that able and worthy leaders are provided, that higher and industrial education are properly correlated and wisely given, the economic, social and spiritual life of the race will be steadily advanced, as the years shall go by, and lovers of human progress everywhere will have greater reason to rejoice in the upward march of an invincible and puissant civilization.