The Black Church and the Politics of Sexuality

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Yes, it does indeed mean something—something unspeakable—to be born, in a white country, an Anglo-Teutonic, antisexual country, black.[1]

It is very important to remember what it means to be born in a Protestant Puritan country, with all the taboos placed on the flesh, and have at the same time in this country such a vivid example of a decent pagan imagination and the sexual liberty with which white people invest Negroes—and then penalize them for. . . . It's a guilt about flesh. In this country the Negro pays for that guilt which white people have about flesh.[2]

"a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. . . . She is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.[3]

Recently the Supreme Court handed down two monumental decisions as it relates to human rights. The first involved the University of Michigan's Affirmative Action policies. The second case involved The Texas sodomy law. As we all now know, the Supreme Court handed down its ruling on the Michigan case on June 23, 2003. Though burdened with the ambiguity of a divided court, the June 23, 2003 decision seemed to uphold in principle Affirmative Action policies as a way of achieving diversity. Several days later, the court handed down its decision concerning the sodomy case, the case officially known as Lawrence and Garner v. Texas. This particular case dealt with the Texas Penal Code, commonly referred to as The Homosexual Conduct

Statue. This particular statue criminalizes sexual activity between homosexual persons even if the acts are consensual. The case before the court concerned two men who were arrested after a police officer noticed them engaged in sexual activity in one of the men's bedroom. The court ruled that the Texas penal code was in fact unconstitional and it infringed upon the rights of homosexual persons.

Just as the University of Michigan case has far-reaching ramifications for racial justice in this country, so too does the Texas sodomy case have significant ramifications for sexual justice. Both cases involve issues of political/human rights in regard to certain minorities.

I cite these two cases because not only do they suggest something about the political climate of our nation as it regards civil/human rights, but they are also instructive for understanding the justice politics of the Black Church. It is interesting to note that as vocal as the Black Church community was in regard to the Michigan case, its silence was deafening in terms of the Texas case. At least two major Black Church denominations, the National Baptist Convention and the Progressive National Baptist Convention offered resolutions in support of Affirmative Action. Moreover, various Black clergy offered comments from in and outside of the pulpit about the case and the justice issues involved. Yet, as far as I have been able to determine the Black Church community remained virtually silent in regard to the Texas case. There have been no resolutions as far as I know offered by major Black denominations concerning the justice issues involved in this case. My unscientific polling suggests that not many Black church people were even aware that the Texas case was before the Supreme Court.

These two disparate responses to cases involving human justice are in fact telling when it comes to the Black Church's attitude toward various justice issues, and hence its involvement in what I term the politics of justice. While the Black Church is certainly one of the most enduring and significant Black institutions, it is also one of the most enigmatic. For, it can be in the vanguard for social justice and change, or it can be a stubborn antagonist to social justice and change. More particularly the Black Church has been, and for the most part, continues to be, in the forefront of racial justice concerns. Yet, it has typically been bringing up the rear in regard to issues of gender and or sexual justice.

Indeed, the Black Church is often characterized as stubbornly homophobic. Though recognizing the presence of gay musicians and choirmasters within the church, and vowing to love the homosexual sinner, Black Church people rarely see homosexuality as an acceptable way of life. Far too often they brand homosexuality as an "abomination

before the Lord." Homoerotic expressions of sexuality are pronounced "sinful." As one Black Church woman recently said to me, "Why can't we just be clear what is right and what is wrong" (implying that homoerotic behavior is wrong).

While the Black Church community is arguably no more homophobic than the wider Church community or heterosexist society of which it is a part, causal observations do suggest that it is perhaps more unyielding and impassioned than other communities when expressing its anti-gay and anti-lesbian sentiments.[4] Again, making its homophobic convictions appear even more reprehensible is its historic commitment to Black freedom and justice. How is it that a Church community so committed to the politics of racial justice can be so intransigent when it comes to the politics of sexual justice and hence gay and lesbian rights? Why is the Black Church community generally so averse to homoerotic sexuality? Why do Black Church people often regard the homosexual body as a depraved body? What makes Black Church homophobia seem more passionate, trenchant, and relentless than the homophobia present in other communities? These are the questions upon which this paper is focused. There are two primary reasons that make these questions most urgent for me.

First, as one who attempts to do her work from a womanist paradigm, central to my work is a "commitment to the survival and wholeness of entire people." This to me is a mandate to do my theological reflection in such a way that it contributes to the well being and freedom of all Black men and women in particular, and all persons in general. Specifically, the womanist mandate is to name and deconstruct, if you will, those "interlocking systems and structures of oppression"—be they social, political, or ecclesiastical (as well as the theo-ideology which sustains them) in an effort to move toward a place where all people are free from that which would threaten their lives and thwart their wholeness/freedom. It is for this reason that I am compelled to address that which is frequently overlooked in the Black community, the issue of sexual justice.

Second, by reflecting upon the Black Church in relation to issues of sexual justice we can learn something more about the Black Church when it comes to its justice politics in general. Before proceeding, however, let me clarify what precisely is meant when referring to the Black Church.

The Black Church is essentially a disparate grouping of churches that reflect the diversity of the Black community itself. These churches are diversified by origin, denomination, doctrine, worshipping culture,

spiritual expression, class, size, and other less obvious factors. This means then that they may be within white denominational structures or independent of them. They can reflect congregational, connectional, and Episcopal systems. They can be urban, suburban, or rural. They range in size from storefronts to mega-churches. They are middle class, working class, and poor. They might reflect highly rapturous or very restrained forms of spiritual expression. Yet, as disparate as Black churches are, they do share a common history and play a unique role in black life, both of which attest to their collective identity as the Black Church.

The Black Church reflects Black people's history of struggle against white racist oppression even as it was born out of that struggle. Moreover, it remains one of the most significant influences upon Black values. It too is a central resource for Black well being—be it physical, emotional, or spiritual well being. W. E. B. Du Bois aptly described the Black Church when he called it both the "religious center" and "social center for black people."[5] Yet, even in recognizing the consistency of the Black Church, it is important also to recognize its variation.

Any discussion of the Black Church in general must appreciate Black churches in particular. For example, while there are prevailing attitudes that characterize the Black Church community, such as the attitudes toward homosexuality, there are also noteworthy exceptions to these attitudes. Thus, while my particular discussion of the Black Church and sexual justice expressly focuses on the prevalent homo-phobic sentiments of the Black Church community, it implicitly acknowledges that there are various and significant Black churches with more liberating and progressive views toward sexual expression. With that said, let me now attempt to answer the question of why the Black Church tends to be so insular when it comes to matters of sexual justice, in spite of its' activism in relation to racial justice. The answer to this question is in fact suggested by James Baldwin's observations, which I cited to open this paper, that it *does* [emphasis mine] "mean something . . . to be born in a white . . . Anglo-Teutonic, anti-sexual country, black"; and that "the Negro pays for that guilt which white people have about the flesh."[6] Baldwin's incisive comments point to an insidiously complex relationship between Christianity and white culture and its impact upon Black lives. It is in understanding this relationship and subsequent impact that we can begin to answer the questions concerning Black Church attitudes toward sexual justice in general and homosexuality in particular. Let me begin by briefly examining the relationship between Christianity and white culture.

Christianity and White Culture

Platonized Christianity

One of Christianity's greatest paradoxes is its attitude toward the human body. Since its origins in a first-century Hellenistic world, Christianity's regard for the body has been enigmatic. Christianity's central confession, God's unique presence in the first century Jew from Nazareth, basically esteems the body as a vessel of divine revelation. The reality of the incarnate God marked as heretical any notion that God was not *en sarki*, that is, a fully embodied presence in Jesus. The divine incarnation seemingly precluded as acceptable to Christianity any belief that reviled the human body/flesh. Yet, there has been a prominent Christian tradition that has denigrated and demonized the body.

In efforts to peaceably exist in the Greco-Roman world in which they were a part, as well as a reflection of the Hellenized Jewish tradition from which they emerged, early Christian thinkers and apologists integrated into their Christian theologies the most prominent Greek philosophies of their day. In so doing, they established within mainstream Christian thought a platonic and stoic influenced, or plastoicized if you will, view toward the body and sexuality. Essentially, the aspects of platonic philosophy combined with stoic ideas to shape certain Christian thinking about the body/sexuality.

Specifically, the platonic belief in the world of forms, that is, the immaterial/True world, as being different and superior to the world of senses, that is, the material/earthly world, coalesced in Christian thought with the stoic regard for reason and disregard for passion. In so doing, a significant strand of Christian thinking adopted a theology that esteemed the immaterial world (which came to be regarded as the world of reason/spirit/soul) while it renounced the immaterial world (regarded as the world of passion/flesh/body). This split between two realms of being eventuated into a body devaluing theology and tradition. Indeed, as this body devaluing theology was appropriated by influential Christian interpreters, a *platonized* Christianity developed.

Platonized Christianity invariably places the body in an antagonistic relationship with the soul. The soul is divinized while the body is demonized. The soul is revered as the key to salvation. The body is condemned as a source of sin. The locus of bodily sin is human passion, that is, sexual pleasure. As we know, a "sacred" disdain for the sexual body pervades the Christian theological tradition. Now

before I proceed, let me just say a word as to why I term this a platonized tradition. To be sure, more than platonic influences are involved in the formation of this Christian juxtaposition of the body/soul, not the least of which is a stoic influence as well as carry-overs from Christianity's Jewish heritage. However, I identify this as a platonized tradition because it is platonic dualism that provides the essential foundation for this perspective. For it is the platonic view of reality that places the realm of the soul and that of the body in an antagonistic, as opposed to a more reciprocal, relationship. Platonic notions of the world set into motion dualistic paradigms, that is, they set things which are opposite in relationships of opposition—there is no Eastern ying/yang with platonic views of the world. And so it is the case that platonic dualism is often seen as the root of antagonistic dualistic paradigms. It is for this reason that I identify the soul regarding/body devaluing Christian tradition as a platonized Christianity. To be sure, this can be a point for later discussion. For now, let me go on to suggest that the Apostle Paul is perhaps the earliest and most influential representative of this platonized Christianity.

Consumed with a belief in the imminent end of the world and informed by his platonized understanding of Christianity, Paul viewed sex as an impediment to salvation. He made clear that unrestrained sexual activity, that is, sexual pleasure, was immoral and a sin against the very body. He encouraged faithful Christians to "Flee from sexual immorality" while admonishing them that "he who sins sexually sins against his own body" (I Corinthians 6:18). While he urged his followers to remain unmarried and celibate, he conceded that if they could not refrain from sexual activity they should marry, "for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (I Corinthians 7:9). Some 300 years later, Paul's views of the body/sex would directly impact one who would have the greatest impact upon Western theological thought, Augustine of Hippo.

Troubled by his own uncontrollable sexual desires, Augustine eventually heeded Paul's words to "make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Romans 13:14). Beholden to Pauline sexual attitudes, Augustine developed a theology that unambiguously pronounced sex as sin. In it sexual desire was considered nothing less than diablolical and a reflection of humanity's sinful nature. The only "moral" reason to engage in sex was for proceative purposes. To reiterate, Augustine was the major conduit for *platonized* Christianity into Western theological thought. In this regard, he influenced both Catholic and Protestant traditions.

In the American theological scene, platonized Christianity found perhaps its most comfortable home in Evangelical Protestantism—that which Baldwin appropriately calls "Protestant Puritanism." Within this tradition, the measure of one's salvation is the ability to be "converted" from the ways of the world. True piety is marked by "self-denial" and resistance to bodily temptations, such as sexual pleasure. Evangelical clergymen such as Cotton Mather prayed that God would not hold against them their participation in the very activity that produced their children.[7]

It is primarily through Evangelical Protestantism that *platonized* Christianity and white culture come together. As a result of this dubious connection, *platonized* Christianity provided a "sacred canopy" for the white cultural attack upon Black bodies. More insidious, this particular sacred/secular collusion undermined Black peoples' views toward sexuality, including their responses to sexual justice. A closer look at the white cultural assault upon the Black body will help us to recognize Christianity's collusion with white culture and complicity in disrupting Black sexual attitudes.

White Culture and the Black Body

In his *Notes on Virginia* Thomas Jefferson described Black men this way:

> They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. . . . In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination.[8]

Jefferson's comments reflect the dominant discourse of white culture in regard to Black people. As a part of its dehumanizing efforts, white culture (that culture which protects and mandates white supremacist notions and practices) depicts Black women and men as hypersexual, lustful, passionate beings. White cultural rhetoric claims that Black people are oversexualized and controlled by their libido. They are, as Jefferson opines, a people governed by passion not reason. Black men are regarded as rapacious predators—"mandigo bucks." Black women are considered promiscuous seductresses, "Jezebels." This sexualized caricature initially provided sufficient justification for the enslavement of Black people. It also vindicated the brutal exigencies of slavery, such as forced breeding. To depict Black men as sexual predators further provided a justification for lynching,

castration, and other crimes committed against their bodies. To label Black women Jezebels allowed white men to rape them with impunity. In the illogic of white culture their rape was a result of white men being victimized by their seductive nature.

White culture's unscrupulous eroticization of Black people attests to Michel Foucault's analysis of the relationship between sexuality and power. "How is it that in a society like ours," Foucault asks, "sexuality is not simply a means of reproducing the species, the family, and the individual? Not simply a means to obtain pleasure and enjoyment? How has sexuality come to be considered the privileged place where our deepest 'truth' is read and expressed?"[9] Foucault answers that this occurs because sexuality is integral to power. It is the axis where the human body and reproduction come together. Power is exerted over people through careful manipulation of their bodies, their perceptions of their bodies, and their reproductive capacities.

Foucault most significantly notes the role of sexuality in maintaining power, especially inequitable power. He argues that sexuality is a vehicle through which distinctions can be made between classes and groups of people. To question or malign the sexuality of another invariably reinforces one's claims to superiority as it implies another group's inferiority. An attack upon a people's sexuality becomes important, then, because sexuality involves one's humanity. Therefore, to assail a people's sexuality is to call into question their very humanity. This is what occurred in relation to Black women and men.

Overall, white cultural sexualization of Black people allowed for the Black body to be exploited in ways that benefited white racist society. Most importantly, it legitimated white supremacist ideology. The fact that Black people were deemed ruled by passion was sufficient proof that they were inferior to white people, a people ostensibly ruled by reason. Black people were considered people of the body/flesh, while white people were considered those of the intellect/soul. In this way, blackness became a sign of an "ardent" nature (that is sexual) at the same time that it signaled a lack of intellect. Thomas Jefferson enunciated this when he commented that "[though] their imagination [was] glowing and elevated . . . yet could I find a black man uttered a thought above the level of plain narration."[10] White cultural rhetoric fundamentally supports the social–political, if not ecclesiastical, domination of Black people by white people. It is in appreciating white cultural representations of Black women and men, that we can recognize the compatibility between Christianity and white culture.

White culture asserts that blackness is synonymous with unrestrained sexuality. *Platonized* Christianity asserts that sexuality is a cauldron of evil and opposes the human connection to God. By arguing the "evil-ness" of sexuality, Christianity implicitly provides a theological justification for any claims that a people governed by sexual desires are innately evil and need to be controlled. Christianity, especially when it does not explicitly challenge the sexualized depictions, in effect supports white culture's debasement of Black people. Moreover, it sanctions white domination over them. For as *platonized* Christianity argues that the body/flesh must be controlled by the intellect/soul, it then follows that Black people (people of the body/flesh) must be controlled by white people (people of the intellect/soul).

The inherent compatibility between *platonized* Christianity and white culture made the advent of religious racism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America almost certain. Evangelical Protestantism provided ample apologia for the white racist treatment of Black people. *Platonized* Christianity, with its views on sexuality, was the implicit theological foundation for assertions that black people were divinely cursed (i.e., the Hamitic curse) and/or non-human, souless creatures.

Platonized Christianity and white culture are basically de facto allies in dehumanizing an entire race of people. White cultural portrayals of Black people are granted sacred legitimation vis-à-vis *platonized* Christianity. Left to discern is the impact that this conspiratorial relationship has had on Black people, especially their views on sexuality.

The Black Church Response to Sacred Sexualization

Black People and Platonized Christianity

Ironically, at the same time that religious racism began to flourish in America, Black people were most influenced by *platonized* Christianity. During America's eighteenth-century religious revivals a significant population of Black men and women were converted to Evangelical Protestant thought. A people whose African religious heritage suggested the sanctity and goodness of human sexuality, now adopted a religious belief that claimed it wicked and evil. It has been widely documented that in many of the West African traditions from which a large segment of the enslaved population originated, sexuality

was seen and celebrated as a sacred gift from God. "Secularity has no life in many African traditions."[11] This means that there is no diminution of the earthly realm, that is, things of the flesh. Every dimension of the world and humanity, according to numerous African religions, is sacred, is of God, and communicates God's presence. This includes sexuality. Again, there was no contradiction between flesh and divinity.[12] This African cosmological understanding had a profound impact on the way in which the enslaved viewed God (about which more will be said later). In large measure then, it was as a result of these eighteenth-century conversions, that *platonized* views toward the human body and thus sexuality were integrated into Black religious thinking, eventually becoming a substantial theological strand within the Black faith tradition.

Black Church people affected by this evangelical tradition tend to affirm the assertions of the Apostle Paul that one should "make no provision for the flesh," but if one must engage in sexual behavior, "it is better to marry than to burn." In general, for that part of the Black faith tradition most influenced by "Protestant Puritan" (i.e., evangelical) thought, the belief that things of the flesh are evil and antithetical to one's salvation is prominent. While such a belief has certainly served a positive function by promoting a certain set of moral values, family stability, self-regard, and perhaps saving Black lives,[13] there can be a more devastating consequence when a *platonized* Christian tradition shapes Black life—a life already put upon by sexualized racist ideology.[14]

Sexuality: A Taboo Issue

What we too often find in relation to Black Church people is, in fact, a twofold sexualized condemnation of their humanity. In this regard, the interaction between white culture and *platonized* Christianity is almost lethal. For at stake, is not simply the sinfulness of the body, but also the vileness of Blackness. This double burden of sin fundamentally forces Black women and men to develop an intransigent attitude toward sexuality, all in an effort at least to sever the tie between it and their blackness. Practically speaking, Black peoples' hope for "social" acceptance and salvation is contingent on one pivotal requirement: a "radical" rejection/denial of sexuality. Such a rejection potentially invalidates white characterizations and assures divine affirmation. With one radical act of sexual denial, Black people can affirm their humanity and redeem their soul.

This sexual rejection/denial is most typically manifest in a refusal to discuss or acknowledge matters of sexuality. Sexuality is treated as a "taboo" issue within the Black Church community, perhaps indicated by the Black Church's silence in regard to the Texas sodomy case. The consequences of this avoiding silence, it's positive value notwithstanding, has perhaps been more deadly than "saving," particularly in more recent history. For instance, it has contributed to the Black Church community's slow response to the HIV/AIDS crisis even though this disease has had an especially devastating impact upon Black life.[15]

Black Church Homophobia

Another form of sexual rejection/denial has been the Black community's tendency to be hypercritical in regard to behaviors considered sexually atypical or abnormal. Such sexual scrupulousness protects Black people from the charge of being "sexually deviant." It is in this way that we must begin to understand the Black Church's politics of sexual justice as it is revealed in its strong homophobic sentiment. Black people's views toward homosexuality must be understood in light of their responses to sexuality in general, particularly as those responses have been refracted through white culture and sanctioned by "Protestant Puritan" thought.

Essentially, in a heterosexist society where non-heterosexual expressions are considered at best abnormal and at worse perverted, Black Church people have found numerous ways to denounce homosexual practices in the black community. For instance, some have asserted that homosexuality itself is incompatible to black life.[16] Various scholars have also gone so far as to pronounce homosexuality a "white thing" based on the erroneous claim that it was not a part of Black people's African heritage, but was introduced to them by Europeans and European Americans during slavery. More impressive, however, have been the Black Church responses to homoerotic behaviors.

Mirroring the wider evangelical tradition, Black Church people tend to view homoerotism as deviant lustful, sinful behavior. As it does not contribute to procreation, it is not considered an "acceptable/moral" form of sexual activity. Making this view even more intractable are appeals to the Bible. Black Church people often invoke biblical authority to substantiate the view that "homosexuality is wrong." Regardless of the misinterpretation involved, with appeals to texts such as Levitcus 18:22, 20:30, Genesis 19:1–9 and Paul's epistle to the

Romans (1:26-27), Black Church people are able to place a sacred canopy over their homoerotic bias.[17] Most significantly, this divinely sanctioned homophobia has provided a profound way to again sever the link between blackness and sexual deviancy. Specifically, Black people are able to affirm the non-heterosexual Black person, while simultaneously denouncing that person's sexual immorality. They often do so with the familiar refrain, "We love the sinner (i.e. the Black person) but hate the sin (i.e. homoerotic behavior)." This distinction between sinner and sin also enables Black churches to welcome homosexuals into the life of the church, if only as accepted sinners. Practically speaking, this means that the non-heterosexual's space is circumscribed within the Black Church. Some have described the gay experience in the Black Church as one of being in an "open closet." "The 'open closet' allows one to be gay as long as they do not flaunt their sexual identity and maintain their proper place."[18] For, those who have not repented of, or been converted from their "sin" may be church musicians or in the pews, but they cannot be pastors and thus in the pulpits.[19]

Ironically, Black Church people's treatment of homosexual women and men mirrors white cultural characterizations of Black women and men. Just as white culture sexualizes the Black community so to subjugate it, the Black Church does the same to the gay and lesbian community. By castigating homosexual persons on the basis of presumed sexual practices, the Black Church has basically made their very humanity contingent upon a specious view of their sexual activity. Similar to Baldwin's observations regarding the relationship between white society and Black people, the Black Church sexualizes the homosexual person and then "penalizes" them for it.[20]

What is important to note overall, however, is that the discussion of sexual justice in general and homophobia in particular within the Black Church is not a simple matter. Black homophobic sentiments do not reflect merely a close-minded sexual bigotry or a simple adherence to Protestant Puritan views toward sexuality. These are sentiments which in part are a response to white cultural sexualization of Black people and the resultant attacks upon the Black body. The rejection of homoerotic sexuality is a way of de-sexualizing blackness. Black homophobia, to some extent, can be understood as a misguided strategy for protecting the integrity of blackness from hypersexual definitions and hence safeguarding Black lives. The obstinate nature of Black Church homophobia can be seen as an almost unavoidable consequence of the congenial relationship between *platonized* Christianity and white culture.

Ultimately, Black women and men are burdened by *both* white incriminations and Christian judgments in regard to their sexuality. The end result is a radical response of sexual denial that commonly fosters sexual silence and sexual bigotry, that is, injustice. In the final analysis, James Baldwin's observations are borne out: it does mean something to be born in a Protestant Puritan country, Black. Left now to discern are the theological implications for the Black Church in an effort to move toward a more just sexual politic.

Toward a New Politics of Sexuality

Even as Christianity's acceptance of dualistic paradigms that condemn sexuality are theologically problematic for a religion that affirms the incarnation, such an adoption is especially troublesome for the Black Church. The Black faith tradition emerged in defiant response to a *platonized* Christian tradition that supported the enslavement and dehumanization of Black people. Because of God's embodied presence in Jesus, the enslaved were able to testify that God was an active and affirming reality in their lives. Moreover, the enslaved proclaimed that they were created in the image of God.

The testimony of the enslaved crafters of the Black faith tradition witnessed to a God who is neither remote nor abstract but one who is personal and intimate. Such testimony was significant as it revealed the enslaved's rejection of white Christian notions that God sanctioned cruel and inhumane treatment of them. It also denied the assertions of religious racism that blackness was a divine curse and thus an affront to God. Central to the enslaved's understanding of a God who cared about them was a fundamental appreciation that Jesus was God incarnate. It was because God was embodied that God could connect with them, responding to their needs. God's embodiment was crucial to any understanding of God's meaning in human history. No doubt because the enslaved inherited and maintained an African religious tradition in which things of the flesh were not associated with evil, they could fully appreciate the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus. Such an appreciation defied any notion that the human body is an impediment to a relationship with God. Indeed, the theology of the enslaved suggests a high regard for the body/flesh as "the very temple of God," as the medium of God's presence in human lives. The enslaved seemingly understood that it was in becoming body/flesh that God has been significantly revealed in human history, in their history. They also perceived that it is only via body/flesh that human beings can reach out to God as well as to one another.

For the Black Church to adhere to a Christian tradition rooted in a repudiation of the body/flesh is for the Black Church to betray its own libratory theological heritage. What's more, for the Black Church to espouse such a *platonized* tradition is for it to affirm the very theological claims that allowed for the compatibility of Christianity and slavery and the persistent disregard for the Black body. *Platonized* Christianity spawned a religiously racist tradition that has served to sanction white supremacist notions of innate Black inferiority. For Black Church people to profess in any way dualistic splits between the body and soul that inherently condemn the sexual body is for them to uphold the very foundation of such a tradition. It is thus important for the Black Church to connect back to its own enslaved religious heritage—one that defied body/soul splits and protected the sanctity of sexuality. In so doing, it must also allow itself to be critiqued by that tradition.

Specifically, the Black Church needs to recognize the parallels between white cultural contempt for them, and their derision of homosexual people. It must deem homophobia as sinful, just as it has deemed racism sinful. But more to the point, the Black Church is compelled to recognize that platonic Christianity spawns and sanctions systems and structures of oppression. It provides the theological framework for dehumanizing ideologies. As it diminishes the significance of God's embodied reality, it allows for the degradation of the bodies of others. This is thus a tradition that must be repudiated if not deemed sinful.

What then does this mean for the Black Church as it functions in the current political climate? It is worth noting that the current political leadership, from the president to the attorney general, is one that embraces and is motivated by what Baldwin called a "Protestant Puritan tradition," that is, a platonized Christian tradition. It is this Christian tradition, which the current leadership unabashedly makes a part of his politic, that allows the current administration to make with such brash certainty distinctions between good people and evil people. It is this same faith-based politic, that allows him to presume upon the Supreme Courts his opinions about fairness, what is right and what is wrong. What the Black Church community must recognize and its leadership must make clear is that the language of faith is not necessarily the language of justice, and may not even be the language of the God they profess. This is what the enslaved understood, thus allowing them to recognize the hypocrisy of their master's piety, reject their master's faith, rebel against their enslavement as they forged their own understandings of God.

It is no doubt that in reclaiming its own non-platonized African religious heritage, a heritage that precipitated the critique of white racism, the Black Church will become more consistent, if not more reliable in its justice politics, not simply as it involves racism, but sexuality as well as other issues. To be sure, not until the Black Church is freed from this platonized Christian tradition, will it be truly liberated from the politics of white cultural domination and oppression. Until such time it will no doubt continue to be at times seduced by this politic and to perpetuate this politic in its stance toward others, such as gay and lesbian persons.

In the end, the issue of sexual justice in the Black Church is a complicated one. Black Church homophobia bespeaks the denigration of Black people by white racist society. It, in many regards, is a sign of Black people's own brokenness and an attempt to be healed. Even still, it is a sin. In this regard, Black Church homophobia can be seen as the sin that sin produced. James Baldwin's observations perhaps puts it best, "the Negro pays for that guilt which white people have about the flesh," and as a result so too do gay and lesbian persons. It is time for the Black Church to truly reclaim its liberating faith tradition. It is time for a new politic of sexual justice in the Black Church.

Notes

1. James Baldwin, "Down At The Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind," in *The Fire Next Time* (1963; reprint New York: First Vintage International Books, 1993), 30.
2. "Studs Terkel Interview 1961," in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), 8–9.
3. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983).
4. For more on the homophobia of the black community in relation to the wider society see Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 1999), 87–88.
5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 153.
6. See above epigraphs.
7. See Forrest G. Woods discussion of Puritan attitudes toward sexual activity in *the Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), see especially 187–196.
8. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia in The Life and Selected Writing of Thomas Jefferson*, edited and with an introduction by Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library 1998), 239.

9. Foucault quoted in James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1993), 293.

10. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 240.

11. See Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 1995), 27.

12. For more on this discussion see Douglas, *Sexuality and The Black Church*, esp. chapter 6.

13. It should be noted that the fear of Black sexuality was pivotal in the lynching of Black people, particularly Black men. given the continuous history of Black men being attacked, maimed, and executed because of presumed sexual activity, the adoption of an ascetic sexuality can become a viable survival tactic.

14. This argument draws upon the analysis I've put forth in an earlier article. In that article I more thoroughly explore the numerous consequences of platonized Christianity on Black lives particularly as it regards Black people's regard for their own body and concept of salvation. See "Black Body/White Soul: The Unsettling Intersection of Race, Sexuality and Christianity" in *Body and Soul:Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, ed. Marvin Ellison and Sylvia Thorson (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2003).

15. For an in-depth discussion see Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*. Note especially the introduction where this issue is first engaged.

16. See for example the argument made by Black female ethicist Cheryl Sanders in "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," in *Journal of Religious Thought 5*, no. 2 (Fall 1989), see also Nathan Hare and Julia Hare, *The Endangered Black Family: Coping with the Unisexualization and Coming Extinction of the Black Race* (San Francisco: Black Think Tank, 1984).

17. See a fuller discussion of the use of the bible in supporting Black Church homophobia in Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, especially chapter 4.

18. For more of this concept of the open-closet see Mindy Thompson Fullilove, M. D. and Robert E. Fullilove, III.Ed.D, "Homosexuality and the African American Church: The Paradox of the 'Open Closet'," at HIVinsite.ucsf.edu.

19. James Baldwin provides a powerful literary depiction of this reality through the protagonist's struggles with his sexuality and spirituality in the novel *Go Tell It on The Mountain*.

20. See epigraph.