

A WOMANIST  
THEOLOGY  
OF WORSHIP

*Liturgy, Justice,  
and Communal Righteousness*

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# Introduction

*Liturgy ought to reflect and relate to everyday life as Black Christians struggle to make sense of life, and worship ought to reflect a captive and alienated people in a strange land, a people in pursuit of liberation, freedom, health, and wholeness.*

—William B. McClain

What has happened to Black worship in the thirty years that have transpired since McClain penned these words? There are several answers. Mainline Protestantism, whether historically Anglo or Black, is fighting for survival. Churches of every description and denomination (or non-denomination) are dying, and a divestment of meaning from liturgy—the inability of worshippers to see themselves and make sense of their lives in religious rites and rituals—is an important reason. Worshippers lament that liturgies are boring, dry, dead, or static, and in response, worship planners and leaders look to incorporate current trends in hopes for revival. Unfortunately, even if these trends bring temporary increases in attendance or participation, rarely do they lead to worship experiences that result in communal liberation and transformation, because most of these trends originate outside Black worshipping traditions. Ironically, churches that remain committed to using traditional liturgies rarely experience communal liberation and transformation for the same reason.

What theologies undergird these liturgies? Were they birthed from African cosmologies and ritual practices? Most liturgies of Black worshipping congregations are based on white supremacist evangelical models that focus on individual conversion and salvation, that promise to wash the believer “whiter than snow.” There is little, if anything, communal about it, and nothing political or revolutionary, so Black communities do not benefit. And, in the last twenty to thirty years, these liturgies have become enmeshed with a prosperity gospel that contends that wealth is good all the time, and all the time, wealth is good. Historically, there have been churches and cults in the African American community that adhered to these theologies, but, even many of those also included social justice elements and communal understandings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a full discussion of Black church and cultic movements, see Gayraud Wilmore, *Black*

What is being offered in many Black churches now is a watered-down gospel that offers cheap grace—a crown without a cross, Easter without Good Friday. This is manifested through liturgies dispossessed of justice, with little communal accountability. What is needed is a new paradigm for worship, rooted in African ancestral cosmologies and communal ontologies, that recovers African and early African American liturgical practices that, for Black worshipping congregations and their communities, have proven meaningful.

*A Womanist Theology of Worship* examines the history of worship in the Black church in America, the enduring effects of white supremacy on its liturgical heritage, and proffers a new liturgical paradigm using a womanist hermeneutic. This paradigm seeks to dismantle problematic liturgies based in white supremacist theologies that have permeated Black worship in America from its inception through the twenty-first century.

In Part One, we examine the Black church's liturgical legacy. Nicholas Wolterstorff writes that two identifying characteristics of Christian communities are “engaging in Christian liturgy” and “embracing the writings of the Old and New Testament as canonical Scriptures.”<sup>2</sup> In Christian worship, we engage in liturgical actions, including reading the Scripture, which calls us to practice justice and share in the struggle against injustice. The word “liturgy,” itself, is from the Greek word *leitourgia*, which means “action of the people.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, liturgy, as Josef A. Jungmann tells us, “is not simply ceremonial—the ceremonies are simply the outward signs of a more profound action. Nor is liturgy merely a set of rules and regulations or an established procedure—rather it is itself the act.”<sup>4</sup> Using these definitions, then, liturgy is action—action based on belief in God's redemptive, reconciling work in the world, both in and through Jesus Christ and through God's people.

The first chapter examines these definitions of liturgy and how they are lived out in worshipping communities composed primarily of persons of African descent living in the United States of America. What is liturgy and why is it important to Black worshipping communities? What is “the work” of its people? At the center of our discussion is the question, “Does the Black church

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*Religion and Black Radicalism*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Joseph R. Washington Jr., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984); Milton Sernett, ed., *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, 2d ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); and Gayraud Wilmore, ed., *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Justice as a Condition of Authentic Liturgy,” *Theology Today* 48 (1991): 6–14.

<sup>3</sup>Franklin M. Segler and C. Randall Bradley, *Christian Worship*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006), 6.

<sup>4</sup>Josef A. Jungmann, *The Liturgy of the Word* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1966), 1–2.

equate liturgy with justice?” Perhaps, more accurately, the question is: “Does the Black church still equate liturgy with justice?” It has been proposed by numerous historians, scholars, preachers, and teachers that the Black church grew out of the need for justice in worship. The “invisible institution” was created because enslaved Africans and their descendants were not allowed to worship freely; indeed, the “acceptable” worship services they were made to attend were little more than attempts to justify slavery as God’s judgment on, or provision for, the inferior, enslaved African. Cosmologically, Africans knew that humans were divinely created and linked to all of God’s good creation.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, they knew that what they were told in the “acceptable” worship services was not true. Their liturgy—the “work of the people”—required creating a sacred space where they could worship God as a God of liberation and justice, and who was keeping them and working out their liberation in God’s time.

The second chapter explores how this cosmological viewpoint, and others from African ancestral traditions, continued to undergird Black worship as the “invisible institution” grew into the Black church and becoming “the center of social intercourse and the citadel of hope against the unfulfilled promises of Emancipation.”<sup>6</sup> Contrary to prevailing, though mistaken, ideas about Africans who were immorally imported to the Americas and elsewhere, Africans worshipped God. It was not the God to whom they were introduced by their Anglo oppressors—once it was deemed necessary to proselytize them—but it was a concept of God as One who had made them as part of divine creation and to whom they were linked as creations of the Most High and part of the divine cosmological order.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, enslaved Africans believed that they were linked to everything in creation—human, animal, and plant—and were responsible, as much as humanly possible, for the well-being of that creation.

Other African cosmological and theological worldviews that directly impacted the understanding of the liturgy of Black worshippers were the concepts of kinship and sacred cosmos. We were kinfolk, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins of each other, though one may have been Fulani and the other, Ashanti, one Kamba and the other, Maasai. Our understanding of life, and subsequently, liturgy, was communal. Sacred cosmos meant there was no separation of sacred and secular because there was no secular; all of life was lived as an offering to the divine. What one did in private, one still did in the presence of God, and therefore, one was called always to live ethically.

From the “invisible institution” through the Civil Rights Movements of

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<sup>5</sup>Melva W. Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>6</sup>Wyatt T. Walker, *Somebody’s Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 20.

<sup>7</sup>Melva W. Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 5–6.

the twentieth century, worship practices in the Black church were imbued with African ancestral calls for equity, justice, and communal righteousness. Inherent in these practices was a communal perspective, which had grown directly out of the African proverb: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am.” Therefore, the *leitourgia* (action of the people) of the Black church, regardless of denomination, was inextricably tied to justice, for there could be no true worship of God without equity and liberation for all God’s people. Chapter 3 investigates the African inheritance in liturgical practices that developed from the arrival of Africans in America through the antebellum period and how those retentions permeated Black worship through the mid-twentieth century.

McClain proclaims that “the genius of black worship is . . . the ability to create the new and fresh out of the old and stale, to lend a refugence to the dark and somber, to create a *tertium quid* out of the coming-together of two diverse influences so distinct and different as to be called unique.”<sup>8</sup> Part Two explores the development of this unique genius—liturgy and liturgies in the Black church—and how, particularly as denominations grew, Black congregations copied or adapted liturgies from churches of European descent for their own use. Chapter 4 examines the unique identity of Black liturgy, as it developed amid antebellum spaces and influences. How did the presentation of Anglo-Christianity become primary in the formation of Black theology? How were distinctions made between what was oppressive and marginalizing for Black skin and spirit, and what was liberative and transformative?

The fifth chapter investigates how these worship practices continued as the “invisible institution” developed into the Black church and were codified in liturgies in visible churches. Many liturgies, most often based on Calvinist, Anglican, or Puritan theologies, were not life-giving or healthy for people of African descent, as they contradicted directly African worldviews of cosmology, theology, and embodiment. Racist interpretations of the biblical text further underscored the oppressive nature of these liturgies. However, Black congregations continued, and continue, to employ these liturgies out of misguided desires to observe orthodoxy and be deemed “good” and/or “safe.” As this occurred, Black worshippers often began to allow African ancestral worship traditions and heritages to be maligned, negated, and, in many contexts, disallowed. It has been well documented that, in many worship settings in mainline Protestantism, whites were against retaining any aspect of what might be considered African worship. The communal nature of call and response was deemed “disorderly,” and the ecstatic nature of music, shouting,

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<sup>8</sup>William B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 50–51.

and dancing was considered “heathenish.”<sup>9</sup> What is more surprising is that, as Blacks began to establish denominations, many leaders and members echoed these sentiments. The assimilation and acculturation processes undergone by Black people in America evinced itself in worship styles in many contexts.<sup>10</sup> Many denied their African worship heritage, assumed a very Anglo posture in worship, attempting to remove any vestiges of Africanness, including skin color, and began to use this characteristic to draw class distinctions. Thus, as we will explore, began a *double-consciousness* in worship that has led to the dichotomy between liturgy and justice.

Chapter 6 examines the deleterious effects of *double consciousness*, the evangelical and prosperity theologies, on Black liturgy and liturgies. Regarding double consciousness, W. E. B. Du Bois articulated:

It is described as a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One forever feels his or her twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>11</sup>

As Black people began to make strides in and become part of mainstream American society and, ever so slowly, became part of either Anglo churches that would accept them or those they built themselves based on Anglo liturgies, they began to abandon their own ways of being in worship. It was not merely a surface abandonment but an entire shift in the theological paradigm of worship. Prior to their inclusion in other churches, the primary focus of worship was liberation—being free to worship the God who would deliver them and working for that liberation through acts of justice in their communities.

This shift was underscored and even enhanced by the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first was a revival movement in the colonies, focused on evangelism, personal piety, and revitalization of church worship. The second, a revival movement much like the first, was located primarily among America’s frontier towns. At the center of this movement was an evangelical theology based in personal experience and responsibility for initiating one’s own religious conversion. This new evangelical paradigm, coupled with the desire to assimilate into American mainstream

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<sup>9</sup>Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 100.

<sup>10</sup>Walker, *Somebody’s Calling My Name*, 25.

<sup>11</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 5–6.

society, with the hopes of being accepted, served to render Africanness a liability, rather than an asset. The focus became individual conversion to the detriment of a communal understanding of salvation. As James Cone writes, “The post–Civil War black church fell into the white trick of interpreting salvation in terms similar to those of the white oppressor. Salvation became white: an objective act of Christ in which God ‘washes’ away our sins in order to prepare us for a new life in heaven.”<sup>12</sup>

No matter how Black congregations may have struggled with the presence, or absence, of African retentions in worship, the ancestral call to communal justice was ever-present in the liturgy of Black protest. Chapter 7 reviews how Black worshippers continued to bind justice to liturgy through protest movements during and after enslavement through the Civil Rights Movements of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Liturgical practices in the form of resistance work centered on a theo-ethic of equity and liberation. Songs, prayers, and sermons employed during these services and events issued a communal response to the question posed by the Psalmist, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps 137:4). Though many may have experienced a dichotomy between liturgy and justice in formal worship on Sunday mornings, the worship that took place in brush arbors, town halls, protest meetings, marches, sit-ins, and bus rides were clearly steeped in African ancestral liturgical calls for justice.

Other religious movements impacting Black liturgy include the rise of storefront churches, the Spiritual Movement, and what E. Franklin Frazier deemed “Negro Cults in the City.”<sup>13</sup> These new denominations and sects developed as Blacks migrated to Northern cities in response to changing economic and political climates in the South. Two of the most impactful issues arising from these new movements were the abandonment of “sacred cosmos” in favor of a dichotomy between flesh and spirit, and the promise of financial prosperity as a result of “the enactment of certain magico-religious rituals.”<sup>14</sup> These two issues have continued to influence the development and role of Black worship and liturgy into the twenty-first century. Consequently, particularly with the advent of televangelism and social media access, a new model of worship, one that prioritizes a personal relationship with God and/or Christ over communal justice and responsibility, and “organic” worship that decries the need for a particular order or liturgy has emerged. This model has been adapted even by denominational churches as a way of attracting people, particularly younger generations. However, because of the dichotomies caused by dual

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<sup>12</sup>James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 134–135.

<sup>13</sup>E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 60.

<sup>14</sup>Hans Baer, “Black Spiritual Churches,” in *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. Gayraud Wilmore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 97.

consciousness and a divestment of justice from liturgy in many churches, this new model has often had the opposite effect.

Furthermore, there is the staunch adherence of many Black congregations to traditional liturgies mired in problematic theologies. Chapter 8 explores how, even as seminary-educated pastors of Black churches have matriculated in and received degrees from institutions teaching Black liberation and womanist theologies, they and the congregations they lead still insist on employing these liturgies. What prevents these congregations from revising these orders or totally rewriting their own liturgies that affirm Blackness, Black life, Black wholeness, and the link between justice and liturgy? One reason is the belief that Blackness is inferior and that anything European is better, higher, and holier. Another is the historical fear of being “wrong” in worship, of being perceived as heathenish or uncivilized. A third is a fear of liberation, itself. Doing the work of liberating liturgies from racist, sexist, white supremacist ideas and ideals is as difficult as liberating bodies, if not more so, because it is the work of liberating the mind and the spirit. To do this work requires a commitment to dismantling white supremacy, which, in itself, requires an acknowledgment that one’s beloved worship is steeped in racist, sexist, and patriarchal theologies and ideologies. That is a monumental task for educated seminarians, let alone pastors and parishioners who may have never seen the inside of a seminary, let alone attended one.

Why is this work necessary? Throughout the last twenty years, the Black church as an entity has lost much of its spiritual and communal authority. The loss of African ancestral legacies has led to an unmooring of the Black church from its liturgical foundations of justice and righteousness. In Chapter 8, we reflect on how allegiance to evangelical and prosperity theologies and their problematic liturgies has caused, in part, an exodus of church members in the last twenty years. This exodus has been primarily among younger generations and is reflected in how recent protest movements, including Black Lives Matter, have declined to invite or involve the Black church on a large scale. Although other factors have certainly contributed to membership decline, a significant number of young Black people are no longer attending churches every Sunday because, as one young woman stated, “They don’t have anything there for me anymore.”<sup>15</sup> When questioned why the Black church isn’t at the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement, Rev. Watson Jones, pastor of Compassion Baptist Church in Chicago, remarked, “The church has lost some of its prophetic voice. It’s lost some of its fervor.”<sup>16</sup> “It’s also lost some of its cultural status,” according to Aldon Morris, Northwestern

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<sup>15</sup>Melanie Eversley, “Black Millennials Dropping Out of Church, But Say It Isn’t Because of Religion,” *The Grio*, March 19, 2019, accessed September 10, 2020, <https://thegrio.com>.

<sup>16</sup>Kelsey Dallas, “Where Are Churches in the Black Lives Matter Movement?” *Deseret News*, July 24, 2020, accessed September 10, 2020, <https://www.deseret.com>.



University professor of sociology and African American studies. “Activists no longer feel like they need the power of religious institutions behind them to change the world.”<sup>17</sup>

In 2010, Eddie Glaude Jr. penned an extremely provocative article, “The Black Church Is Dead.” Rather than an epitaph, the piece reads as a call to consciousness for stakeholders. Glaude delineates reasons why the Black Church is no longer “central to black life” and “a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation.”<sup>18</sup> One that is central to the purpose of this book is his claim that “we have witnessed the routinization of black prophetic witness,” meaning the Black Church’s authority is now based simply on what happened in the past. Professor Glaude warns: “But such a church loses its power. Memory becomes its currency. Its soul withers from neglect. The result is all too often church services and liturgies that entertain, but lack a spirit that transforms, and preachers who wish for followers instead of fellow travelers in God.”<sup>19</sup> The reason these services and liturgies lack a transformative spirit is because of decades, even centuries, of liturgies and liturgical practices that have not served Black congregations and communities well.

In a hopeful response, the final part of the book offers a new paradigm for Black worship, one that reimagines liturgy and liturgies through a womanist lens and works to dismantle white supremacy in and through the Black church. Chapter 9 examines the roots of liturgical theology—both outside and inside the Black church—and offers a framework for a womanist liturgical theology that centers on African and African-descended cosmological and theological worldviews and spiritualities; affirms full embodiment in worship; employs womanist hermeneutics in all worship elements, and womanist hermeneutics/spirituality of communal empowerment and agency. Chapter 10 outlines this new womanist liturgical theology and paradigm, exploring how womanist worship and liturgy would look and operate in praxis. The paradigm addresses how historic violence done to Black American bodies—physically, socially, politically, and religiously—over the past four hundred years has resulted in disembodied worship and liturgy in Black worshipping contexts and caused a disconnect between prophetic witness and lived protest.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the

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<sup>17</sup>Dallas, “Where Are Churches in the Black Lives Matter Movement?”

<sup>18</sup>Eddie Glaude Jr., “The Black Church Is Dead,” *HuffPost*, April 26, 2010, accessed September 11, 2020, <https://www.huffpost.com>.

<sup>19</sup>Glaude, “The Black Church Is Dead.”

<sup>20</sup>Ethicists Katie Cannon and Riggins Earl and theologians Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and Dwight Hopkins are but a few who have explored the concept of embodiment and how it relates to the Incarnation of Jesus and Christian discipleship, viewed through Black theological and/or womanist hermeneutics. More recent works, including M. Shawn Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), Anthony Pinn’s *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), and Eboni Marshall Turman’s *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies,*

chapter includes a broad overview of how womanist spirituality permeates this paradigm, bringing to it a holistic identity and approach. In closing, a brief epilogue offers reflections and thoughts on how the Black church might use this paradigm and research to recover and restore its full prophetic identity.

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*the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), take the concepts of embodiment and incarnation further and offer models that prove helpful in constructing a womanist theology of worship.