

## **Forgiveness and Reconciliation: The Black Church Tradition**

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Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, Associate General for Interfaith Relations, members of the Interfaith Relations commission, guest and visitors to the Congress on World Religions after 9/11. I wish to Thank Shanta for inviting me to participate on this panel and to share my experience on Forgiveness and Reconciliation from an historical Black Church tradition. I am serving on the Interfaith Relations commission as a representative from the historic African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church which was founded in 1796 in New York City after a group of persons petitioned Bishop Francis Asbury of the then Methodist Episcopal Church to move a desired location to form our own church because of the kind of treatment they received in the services of the church. He agreed and we were incorporated in New York in 1801 thus becoming the African Methodist Episcopal Church in New York later to add the word ZION in 1848 to distinguish ourselves from the African Methodist Episcopal Church led by Richard Allen in Philadelphia.

It is important to note today that the fathers of the newly formed A.M.E. Zion church had no fault with the doctrines, form of government, and evangelistic and soul saving emphases of Methodism, but they could not endure the constant humiliation and restriction imposed by the people into whose hands Methodism had fallen.

So it is in this background that I began this discussion by saying that the theology of the Black Church tradition informs our views on forgiveness and reconciliation.

It is important to understand how the Black Church does its theological work. We move from experiencing to thinking, from the specific to the abstract. God is perceived as writing on our hearts and souls before attempts are made to formulate, systematize, and understand in our heads. Experience precedes cognitive behavior. God acts and we react.

The Black Church came to experience the grace, mercy, and deliverance of God and we came to know God as the God of Justice. The Black Church is a thankful people in celebration of the “drowning of pharaoh’s army” and the breaking of the chains of slavery. Forgiveness has not been an issue in the Black Church tradition and reconciliation has been its goal (even to a fault). Is not the quest for integration reflective of this? We have wanted to be one, a part of, at peace, accepted, working in harmony with those who persecuted us, denied our humanity, raped our mothers, wives, sisters, castrated and lynched our fathers, husbands and brothers, sought to destroy our dignity, and our dreams, and kill our hope. And still the quest of the Black Church tradition has been for forgiveness and reconciliation.

This tradition is unlike many others, who in the words of Bishop Tutu, “Think of forgiveness as something nebulous, something esoteric, something that was all right for people so inclined, but that tended to happen only between individuals and had really no significance for the body politic.”

A historic trend of forgiveness and reconciliation runs through the life of the Black Church tradition. It connects its past with its presence, its yesterday

with its today. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's life and death is the embodiment of this theological ethic.

It was Dr. King himself who said at a national conference on Religion and Race in 1963: "I am happy to say that the nonviolent movement in America has come not from secular forces, but from the heart of the Negro Church...the principles of love and justice stand at the center of the nonviolent movement are deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian heritage." He went on to say that "I gained my major influences in philosophy, theology, and ethics from Morehouse College and Crozer. And I am deeply grateful to them. They gave me the basic truths that I now believe." It was on the basis of King's theological and ethical presuppositions that he formed the concept for the development of the Beloved Community. He firmly believed that people could live together in peace if they tried hard enough. The fact that he believed in a God who is creative, orderly, all-powerful, and completely loving made him also believe that since we are made in the image of God, we can possess the same attributes.

I came across some powerful words in my preparation for this panel and they come from America's Dean of Preachers-Black or White, Dr. Gardner Taylor, retired pastor of Concord Baptist Church. He says, "There is "conscienceless power". But there is also "powerless conscience." Where power is not regulated by conscience, it becomes arrogance and brutality. Where conscience is not supported by power, it becomes futility. Thus, our primary responsibility now in this country is to humble ourselves, to recognize that we have not been perfect in the world, nor have we been the worst. We saw

glorious acts of heroism and faithfulness on the part of the people at the World Trade Center and all through this country. We hope that the Lord will grant that, not just for the moment but also beyond, so that we may deal, if we humanly can, with the question of whether this country can bring together its power and humility. We have to ask ourselves, Why are we hated so around the world? Now, in one sense power inevitably invites resentment. But if we are going to be a nation under God, then by the grace of God, our power and our humility and our sense of being a part of the human family must come together. If our power is not accompanied by humility, we're lost to the kingdom of God. And on the other side, if our humility is unaccompanied by power, we're lost in this kind of world. Our only hope is that the power we have will be brought together with humility and restraint.

And the people on the margins of this society- minority people- will be a part of helping this happen. W.E.B. DuBois said back in the early part of the last century that there is a "two-ness" in being black in America, being IN it and yet not quite OF it, reaping its benefits yet feeling some of its strings of injustice. Minority people are now peculiarly and, I believe, Dr. Taylor says, "providentially endowed by God to speak to the nation and say that pride brings ruin and that this country must look to reconciliation.

Retaliation, very well, but reconciliation must be our ultimate aim unless we want to risk utter ruin. We will never bomb hatred out of the world. Hatred produces hatred. This history of the world is replete with that, and somehow, we have not learned the lesson. We've fought war after war after war. First, World

War I to save the world for democracy. Then, the next one to rid the world of the evil of narcissism ,and on and on. When will someone step forward and say, “Beyond retaliation to reconciliation”?

One might well ask in all of this, Where is there a higher challenge and call to witness from the church? Are these not times for more than a sentimental pastoral and priestly role for Christianity? Does our understanding of Christianity extend only as far as the national flag? Certainly, the church has multiple roles, particularly ones that seek healing, consolation, forgiveness and reconciliation, but the church also must be a medium for other constructively critical voices from groups relegated to the margins of society.

We need more wholesome and reconciling approaches to “conflict resolution” and ways to cope with violence than what government officials, Congress, and media executives currently are sending to the youth and children of America. Is our only responsibility to bring them nearer to global apocalypse? Are African Americans the only ones to be required “to turn the other cheek” and “forgive for righteousness” sake those who persecute them (Matthew 5)? Are we not making a mockery out of the Martin Luther King Jr, holiday that celebrates the power of nonviolence?

Beyond the drum rolls, the call to arms, and the heightened rhetoric of retaliation and more violence, lies the vision of Jesus of Nazareth; it is a vision that we all may be of “one heart and soul”, of one spirit.