

The Decline of African American Theology
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I just read a terrific review of Thabiti Anyabwile's *The Decline of African American Theology*. I definitely will get a copy of the book. Sight unseen, three significant things about the topic and Anyabwile's findings, or at least his thesis stand out.

First, it should be clear by now that even with the presidential election of a constitutional law professor, one worthy of teaching at the University of Chicago, the US is still deep in the grips of anti-intellectualism. I cannot express adequately the heartbreak this causes me. And, no, I'm not being melodramatic. This is not hyperbole.

I started to read several books on the topic of American anti-intellectualism. I had to stop. I was becoming morbidly depressed. The only things that snapped me out of it were my job and my students. Somewhere in America people did care about thinking, if not doing it professionally, at least doing it for large chunks of time throughout the school day and beyond.

As a sign of how desperate I am, I actually exclaimed in my Plato and Aristotle seminar that I longed for William F. Buckley. The one student old enough to know who Buckley was couldn't help but laugh. You see, I grew up thinking. One of my favorite activities from my pre-teen years onward was to watch Buckley's Firing Line. I watched it religiously. I watch You Tube clips of it still. For me that show was the equivalent of roller derby (which I also loved watching) and wrestling (which I didn't enjoy watching). Later, when I was 8 or so and learned how to play chess, I'd imagine Buckley as various chess pieces.

Everything would be going along swimmingly for his opponent and then, WHAM! Black knight stomps on the hapless White Queen. Buckley's ferocious intellect was not used in service of

cheap and tawdry "gotcha" politics and what masquerades as commentary today. Mostly, I disagreed with Buckley's views. But wow! I loved to see the guy make mincemeat of his opponent. Perhaps my recollections here are too pugilistic. Fine. I heartily enjoyed Buckley pushing and probing his interlocutor. Testing him (and they were nearly all "him's"), challenging him to go to the end of the interlocutor's thesis. I never got the sense that Buckley would oppose a view, simply "because". Show him a good reason, show him the reasoning behind something, show him that the view leads to something consistent with his closely held principles and values, show him something that was in addition to these, good and just. I have no doubt that Buckley would have been a co-signer right then and there.

The problem from the opponents' perspective (or mine) was that this rarely, if ever, happened on Firing Line. If you want to see perhaps the sole final checkmate against Buckley, check out the magnificent video of his 1965 debate at Cambridge University with James Baldwin. The topic of the debate was "The American Dream is at the Expense of the American Negro". I get goosebumps just thinking about it.

Why the preamble about Buckley? I affirm the Nicene Creed. I also affirm the genuine gift of human thought. I also recognize that with this gift comes the responsibility to nurture the gift and to use it for my own good and the good of others. In short, it is because I am a "thinking theist" that I am so disheartened by the paucity of thinking persons in public fora. This includes the Christian church.

One only needs to browse quickly through the holdings at any reputable seminary library or university library to realize that there has been not only a decline in African American theology, there has been a decline in American theology in general. And, to come full circle: there's simply been a decline in thinking in America.

Name any early Church Father; yes, I'll even let you include the borderline heretical cases. Any one of them could mop the floor with any televangelist of the past 50 years. Maybe that's not saying

much. But I would also submit that they could obliterate most every pastor -- black, red, yellow, pink, cerise, whatever -- in America today. (I thought about swapping out "obliterate" for "eviscerate" but decided it was too graphic. You nevertheless can tell where this is going.)

Who among the pastors today could possibly match the sheer knowledge of philosophy and theology that Augustine had? Or Origen? Or Clement? The power of the Word they preached was fueled by logos in all its dimensions. The Logos as Lord, but also the logos as thought, argument, account, and reason. The image I frequently offer my Religion classes is that of a character I call "Bible Bob". This may or may not be his real name. Bible Bob was a guy who came on to the SFSU campus back in the late 80's and early 90's (at least) carrying a huge Bible and a plastic milk crate. He'd set up shop in the main quad and he'd let 'er rip!

I would try to imagine Augustine approaching Bible Bob and attempting to converse with him. I never had the idea that Bible Bob and Augustine would soon begin shouting at each other. My imaginary meeting always ended in one of two ways. Augustine would leave poor Bible Bob stammering as Bob grabbed his milk crate pulpit and ran off campus. The other was a vision of Augustine slowly walking away, shaking his head in disbelief and sorrow. Why? Because one could not intelligently engage Bible Bob. There's not much hope of having a conversation with someone whose best punch is to scream Scripture, and nothing much more, at you.

I bring Bible Bob up in class to make three points: 1) I'm a thinking theist; I am not Bible Bob. 2) If your essays are filled with nothing but Oprahisms or Scripture verses be prepared to flunk this class. 3) If all you can do is to rant against Oprahisms, trivialize religious belief, or mock religious scriptures, you should also be prepared to flunk the class. It is a philosophy class after all. So while non-theists or non-religious believers in the class needn't be afraid of engaging critically the phenomena of religious belief for fear of "hurting my feelings", neither should the religious believers think they've got a free pass to blather on about how Jesus helped them find their lost cat or how Jesus

saved their mother from breast cancer.

Again and again I say to them: I could care less about what you feel or believe. I only care about what you think.

The point I am making, in an admittedly long-winded way, is quite simple: We are in the grip of a severe case of anti-intellectualism. It is no wonder, then, that there has been a decline in theological thinking.

Second, I suspect that the decline in African American theology is in part a case of a delayed response to, or catching up with, the *Zeitgeist* of late 20th century America. The predominant culture was preoccupied with consuming and satisfying everything that could fill one's empty shell of personhood. Whereas the culture was preoccupied with that which would satisfy one's personal, "me first", needs, the black church showed itself to be a laggard, late-adopter of the ethos, Reverend Ike aside.

In the 1970's, while the streets were still resounding with "Black Power" rhetoric, the pulpits were proclaiming the normative "old school" values of education, propriety, and hard work. Get an education, wear clean and proper clothes, sit and speak like a proper gentleman or lady, work hard at whatever task set before you: those were the key ingredients of success. Such success might be measured in terms of racial uplift, as opposed to human uplift, but it would yield success nonetheless.

How to get up and out of the ghetto? Education, propriety, and hard work clearly delineated the path. How could you expect to get ahead if you did not have the highest certificate or degree necessary for your practice or trade? The only way to be sure of never being sold back into slavery, whether truly indentured work or simply the run of the mill demanding and mostly demeaning domestic work, was to have the requisite education and the sense to look the new part. No droopy drawers for Duke Ellington or slutty woman of the night wear for Madame C. J. Walker. Last, one could not expect that even with a freshly inked sheepskin rolled neatly under a well-pressed sleeve would automatically open hitherto

closed doors. No, it would entail a persistence only a much closer descendant of the Middle Passage or a much more recent African immigrant to the US could either recall or comprehend.

These three virtues, which by no means are exclusively African American virtues, were givens. I can imagine them woven in weekly sermons in small clapboard churches that were only a few decades removed from being the Negro quarters of a plantation. The "name it and claim it" theology of the Gospel of prosperity would have been foreign, I think, to these Christians.

In the consumerist atmosphere of the ruling class in the immediate post-Civil Rights era, i.e., the period immediately after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the middle class ethos of hard work, propriety, and the doors that having not merely an education, but the right kind of education, could prop open, were very much in effect. The same playbook, then, was used by both groups: those in power or who were advantaged because of their race and gender, and those who were not so advantaged.

By the 1980's and 90's, the "me generation" was in full swing, and eventually made worse by the rapacity of the young barons of Wall Street and Silicon Valley. These people, mostly young, might have been educated, but might not have been educated to the degree to which their parents had hoped or would have presumed necessary for their children's success. Bill Gates? A college dropout. There's no question that yuppies and buppies worked hard. But the kind of work they did was often unorthodox in the extreme. Punch a time clock? Are you kiddin' me? Late nights, sure. Days that turned into weeks without sleep? Naturally. Living on the fumes of Top Ramen, candy bars, coffee, and maybe drugs? How else to create the innovation or attain the highest commissions?

What about propriety? What about it? For that matter, the question, if posed to this generation may very well have been: "Propriety? What's that?" Certainly there was no thought given to abiding by the staid rules of the 1950's business or educational worlds. Instead, maintaining one's "street cred" as a part of the "in crowd", as a fellow revolutionary in the field of information technology, commerce, or

the arts required something else altogether. Still, there was at least some distinction to be made between being passé and cutting edge. Those with the sharpest cutting edges won.

This does not mean that having the sharpest edges in town required that one be a Simon Legree. Sharpness, in this sense, simply meant being open to and on the leading edge of the latest advances in science, culture, business, and human interactions. If 1950's propriety meant marrying the girl you got pregnant, 1990's propriety could be satisfied by a much different compact.

In just a few short years, thanks in part to the Tech bubble's burst and the Great Recession of 2008 (otherwise known as the 21st century Depression), such extravagance and irrational exuberance have been muted, if not silenced. It will not be silenced forever. I leave it to the reader to regard this as either good or bad news. In the meantime, the black churches, not all of them, clearly, but both megachurches and storefront churches, have finally caught the bug: prosperity and abundance is king. For Christians of a certain orientation, few things could be more profoundly in error; few things could be more heretical to the true Gospel of Jesus, the Christ. If the "praise team" even knows the gospel hymn "Ride On, King Jesus, Ride On", they are apt to be coaxed into singing it after yet another slick pulpit infomercial on the virtues of the family of God here assembled purchasing a Bentley or a Rolls Royce for the pastor, and others "touched" by God might name and claim the specific color of their Bentley, too.

I have nothing at all against owning a Bentley. Anyone who knows me, even in passing, realizes that it is my "dream car". But I am equally confident that if anyone were asked, they would immediately understand that the emphasis here is on "dream". All who know me understand fully that I could scarcely live with myself were a Bentley to be parked in my garage. What "sounds more" like Pam, they would say, would be for her to do something useful with that \$250,000, say, offer scholarships to college students, fund the reopening of an elementary school library, or underwrite the opening of a grocery store (not a liquor store with three wilted heads of Iceberg lettuce and five quarts

of expired milk) in the chronically underserved and crime-ridden neighborhoods of many urban, and minority, communities.

Clearly many entrepreneurs are still yearning for the high life of the 90's and early 2000's. But others have acquired that silly thing that used to be called a "social conscience". Not all, some. In the meantime, however, Creflo Dollar and others, have very little to say, it seems to me, about having anything close to the social consciousness of a King or a Dorothy Height or a Harry Belafonte.

If I am right, then there is a negative correlative relationship between the decline of African American theology and the contemporary culture that idealizes social conscientious social engagement. As this idealized culture is moving upward, African American theology and popular culture, generally, are moving in precisely the opposite direction. To make a long, ghastly, tragic story short: a Martian would have a hard time distinguishing between the Gospel of Prosperity preached on any given Sunday and the visual content of some of the most popular music videos or reality television shows of the urban genre of the past 10 years or so.

I admit that's a sweeping claim. I am confident, however, that most everyone recognizes the claim is true, be it 30%, 50%, or 75% true. The truth is that the most ephemeral and worldly characteristics of our popular culture (the Internet, music, literature, fashion, and television) are far from being washed in the Blood of the Lamb and redeemed in the Name of the Lord (Kirk Franklin aside, ya'll.) The predominant African American theology is not so much addressing this critically so much as co-opting it and embracing it as though it were, or worse, as though it ought to be, the norm.

I am at a disadvantage because I have not yet read the book. But I take the review by C. E. Moore to be thorough, at least in its coverage of the main thesis of the book. Thus I gather that the key pillars of theological training one would expect in a seminary are the very ones that Anyabwile reveals as missing in some (or most) that produce theologians (Black or White) of African American theology. And if that is a misstatement, then at least it appears as though the most popular and leading African

American preachers are preaching a Gospel so far removed from the "Old Time Religion" as to be nearly unrecognizable.

Imagine Martin Luther King, Jr. going undercover at the typical (or perhaps stereotypical) multi-million dollar "worship center". I see him nodding in agreement that the verses the congregation has just read in unison from their King James Bibles were indeed from Deuteronomy. But I also see King blinking in astonishment at how those verses were used and to what end.

Many will obviously complain that all I've done is a variation on the pot calling the kettle black. Didn't King use Scripture to make the not so obvious point that black liberation from the yoke of segregation was a Biblical imperative?

Sure. I admit this. My argument with those who have led African American theology into decline is this: Which "gospel" is more in keeping with the Jesus of the Gospels, gnostic, synoptic, or otherwise? On the face of it, the Gospel of Prosperity is at extreme odds with the Beatitudes, for instance. And to move away from the synoptic Gospels for a moment, the Gospel of Prosperity seems clearly at odds with what we know of the early church, whether from Acts or the writings of the early church fathers and mothers.

The past is the past. I do not mean to romanticize it, even though it may seem as though I'm canonizing it. The point isn't to valorize the past merely because it is the past and not the present and hence, morally laudatory. No, the point is to seek meaning, to seek new meaning from Scripture and from the oral traditions of the Community of Saints. We are living now. We need a word given to us for today. I'm all for that. And I imagine Anyabwile is as well.

I admit my prejudice. I would much rather revel in an orgy of Thomistic deductive reasoning than "get my hands up in the air and wave 'em like I just don't care." I would much rather read what Augustine has to say to me, even across this great expanse of time, than to send in a "love offering" for a three week, twelve hour sermon on why God wants you to be able to buy me a Bentley. OK. This last

bit was a cheap shot, but you get my point.

I think if the Gospel of Prosperity as stereotypically preached on television and as codified in whatever poor excuse for a seminary these people are attending were what Jesus intended for us, the Crucifixion might not have happened. Why suffer such degradation if God want you to prosper? How could Jesus be our role model? What part of "not of this world" applies to desiring bejeweled headboards and gilded living room furniture?

Not that I have direct knowledge, but my guess is Jesus is really happy Warren Buffett and Bill Gates are billionaires. I just think Jesus is happier seeing where those billions are going and what those billions are being used for. I cannot say for certain, but I have ever reason to believe that the most munificently "blessed" televangelist has also used some of that money wisely and for very good causes. I simply hold them to a higher standard. As ministers, as shepherds you simply cannot be about out-blinging a gansta rapper or Paris Hilton. This is not what Jesus would do.

Now if my observation is correct that African American theology is running a few decades behind enlightened American culture, and if there's any sense in my version of guessing what it is that Jesus would do, then there remains the question: What comes next?

My view is that the preachers whose theological foundations are so shallow will continue preaching and leading their followers down into Plato's Cave. For instead of leading them to the Light, they lead people, not into Platonic darkness, but into a dungeon of shadows and reflected "glory". What their followers take to be reality is in fact the most depraved excuse for reality. It is the Gospel of Pretense that is being instilled in them, not the Gospel of Peace. It is a Gospel of Intellectual Poverty that they dare call a Theology of Abundance. It is the Gospel of Solipsism that masquerades as a call to genuine Christian community.

Nothing I've written rests on casting my lot with any particular "traditional" or "progressive" theology. My point is that whatever theological perspective I would claim, that theology would in

nearly every respect, be classical, in its orientation. No doubt, my professional work would in large part be responsible for this. But I've also had a life and been a member of enough churches (large and small), to have been introduced to, if not adopted, a wide range of theological positions that influence my daily behavior, attitudes, and Christian witness in the world.

In the end, I can only confess that I am a philosopher. I do not have a degree in Religion. I deliberately avoided obtaining one. I have not studied in a seminary. I don't have anything against religious education or seminaries. I don't believe that people with doctorates in Religion are somehow intellectually outclassed by those of us with doctorates in Philosophy. Some PhD's in Religion are downright brilliant; some PhD's in Philosophy are merely pompous.

Although I am a Christian, I must end with a philosophical truth. Or perhaps I should say that because I am a Christian, I must end with such a truth, call it an intellectual truth, even if delivered in the grand tradition of the Hebrew prophets. Unless and until our society (and that means all of us) abandons its anti-intellectualism it won't really matter which Gospel is preached, which theology is taught, or which presidential candidates run for office. Few Americans will be equipped to distinguish repetitive slogans from sustained, substantive thought, discern what are the fictions of sophisticated opinion-mongers from reasoned discourse about historical facts, let alone rightly divide the blaring bleats of the ill-informed from the edifying, but often clamorous, conversations of the knowledgeable.