

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND INCULTURATION

Presenter: Reverend Edward K. Braxton

Moderator: Diana L. Hayes

True inculturation can only take place from within the context of the heritage and culture of the people with which the church is in contact. Father Braxton thus initiated his presentation, entitled "African American Consciousness: Sources and Manifestations," by stating that "there is an urgent need for Catholic laity, religious, priests, and bishops, of whatever race, to gain a better knowledge and understanding of African American consciousness." He continued:

This understanding is essential if parishes, dioceses, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the Holy See itself are to participate credibly in the discussion of issues that deeply concern People of Color in this country. In order to attain a genuine appreciation of the sources and manifestations of African American consciousness, the Catholic Church, especially its leaders, must become a learning, listening church, attentive to voices that it normally does not hear: those attempting to speak for thirty million Black Americans.

Five "representative and important" sources and manifestations were presented and discussed by the speaker: (1) cultural analysis; (2) historical criticism; (3) university studies; (4) the theatre; and (5) popular culture.

In his treatment of "cultural analysis," Braxton discussed the Afrocentric turn among Black Americans, noting that this "awareness that African cultural values influence speech, behavior, family life, and moral values, and the (accompanying) quest for freedom and autonomy in Black communities goes back to the nineteenth century." African Americans have, in other words, been aware of and have continuously sought to present an Afrocentric perspective to counteract the reigning Eurocentric perspective in today's world, a "Western ethnocentric interpretation of reality" which enables White Western European authors to write "as if their worldview is universal, objective, and normative." An Afrocentric analysis, Braxton noted, "expands and reclaims human history by creating a new path for interpretation" and thereby empowers Black Americans by enabling them to identify as a people "with a time, a place, and a history before slavery and before the United States." The work of Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, was cited and briefly discussed as an example of efforts being made in this area.

This led to a discussion of "historical criticism," a critical reexamination of the Black presence both in the United States and in the world which reveals "many important Black people, achievements, ideas, events, movements, and developments that were dismissed or concealed by scholars who took for granted the historical insignificance of People of Color." An "ongoing process of retrieving the

historical reality and achievements of Black people," Braxton noted, "is an essential component of African American consciousness."

The groundbreaking work, *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* by Martin Bernal, provided a foundation for this discussion, particularly Bernal's thesis that "Black people have played an important role in the birth of Western civilization," a role that has been consistently denied them.

In his discussion of "University Studies," Braxton referred to Henry Louis Gates and his work, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, which Braxton believes "contributes to the linguistic framework of African American consciousness." Gates describes African myths, early African slave narratives, and other Black literature as having a "distinct literary tradition that is intrinsically related to the Black vernacular tradition" and identifies this as the "signifying tradition," a "ritualized language game full of indirection, boasting, insults, and salacious humor." These insights present "the existence of a separate Black American verbal tradition" and place that tradition "at the cutting edge of literary theory" for today.

As his fourth source, Braxton discussed the theatre, especially the plays of August Wilson. One of these, *The Piano Lesson*, can be seen as a "lesson in African American consciousness." Braxton noted that

Wilson's plays seek to drive those in the audience into a confrontation with their past so that they can arrive at an authentic identity. The piano becomes the symbol of linkage to the past, to Africa, to who people really are and who they can become. The debate about the piano is really about what should be done with the Black legacy. How do you best put it to use? do you protect and enshrine it in the present or do you risk it for the future?

The last point of Braxton's discussion dealt with popular culture. He asserted that "in popular American culture we find that African American consciousness is at once affirmed, negated, and assimilated." Supporting this with references to television and the movies, he pointed to the "Bill Cosby Show" as a positive example of the subtle presentation of the work of Black musicians and artists while in the movies, most depictions of Africa are still focused on white characters rather than the situation of the African peoples themselves. By drawing critical comparisons to the films of Spike Lee and Eddie Murphy and to the films *Glory* and *Driving Miss Daisy*, he showed the wide range of cultural depictions of Blacks in the United States today. In this part of his presentation, Braxton also discussed the uniqueness of rap music and the growing influence of various popular manifestations of Islam in the Black community as part of the continuing evolution of African American consciousness.

Braxton's presentation ended with "pastoral reflections" on the sources and manifestations he had presented, connecting the consciousness movement with the evolution of an African American Catholic consciousness as manifested in the desire for indigenous expressions of worship and a growing interest in Black theology among Black Catholics as well as all of the influences presented earlier.

The presentation ended with a brief discussion of the term "African American" and the negative use of the word "minority." The former can be seen as a positive identification with a rich and diverse culture that is ancient while the latter

can be seen as a means of denigrating the important contributions of People of Color to the United States and forces Black Americans "to see their identity in terms of who they are not, rather than in terms of who they are."

The presentation was followed by an intense and lively discussion by the large number of persons present at the workshop. The discussion ranged from the recent activities of former Catholic priest George Stallings and the impact of his departure from the church on African American Catholics and the church as a whole to how one relates to and continues to be aware of the nuances of the consciousness movement as a White Western American. Much of the discussion revolved around the importance of self-knowledge for all Catholics and greater awareness of the diversity of the church in the United States. In addition, questions concerning the development of a Black theology from the Catholic perspective and the shape such a theology would take were raised and discussed.

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