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Independent Study

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"The Theology of the Blues"

I. Introduction

No black person can escape the blues, because the blues are an inherent part of black experience in America. To be black is to be blue. -- James Cone (p. 103).

Nobody loves me but my mother,
And she could be jivin' too. -- B.B. King

I can't stand you, Baby, but I need you,
You're bad, but you're oh so good. (Cone, 5).

What is it about the blues that seem to touch most everyone? Is it the fact that we've all experienced troubles in our lives; that we all know how a woman longs for her man, and man for his woman; how it feels to lose your job, your sense of purpose; what it feels like to be rejected and alone; to be wounded and deceived? Let's face it, sometimes it just feels good to have "the blues". Now, I'm not referring to a pouting fit or a self-pity spree, but a genuine sense of feeling *blue* - that things aren't as they should be, but somehow that's alright, because at least I can sing the blues, at least I can have a good cry and come away somehow feeling better. Some have said that the blues singer speaks the truth about life. And in a way, this constitutes a theology, a way of making sense out of the senseless things which occur throughout life. My hope in beginning this project was to tap into the rhythms of the blues and see if I could hear and feel what the blues had to say about God and us, and *us and us*. What I found was the cultural experience of a people and their means of expressing that experience.

Lately I've become more aware of how diverse the peoples of this world are. It is exciting to serve a church (ELCA) which is committed to becoming more culturally diverse in order to welcome the challenges facing this country, as its cultural complexion changes. These changes, however, can and have been perceived as threats to our own *European-American* identities, being the dominant culture in the U.S. They are perceived as threats, because of the many fears associated with change - with the unknown - with the relinquishment of power - with the stranger. Jesus called the people of his day to take radical new looks at their definition of *neighbor*. If we are to live in obedience to his teachings, then we must be careful about who and what we accept and reject.

Just as diverse as the people, are their experiences of what is holy, of the Almighty. By exploring other people's faith, one encounters various ways of *doing* theology, that is, understanding and articulating one's faith and experience of God. This term I have encountered a kind of black theology. I say *kind* because, even among the black church, there is diversity. Yet one thing runs consistently throughout. Namely, that *music is central to the black expression of theology,* and, to some extent, to the expression of traditional Lutheran theology.

During the month of January, I worshipped at two predominantly black congregations; one in the heart of Chicago (Bethel Lutheran, ELCA), and another in Davenport, IA (Third Missionary Baptist). At both services, it was clear that music was important. In an interview with the pastor at Third Missionary Baptist Church in Davenport, we discussed what worship would be like without music. Both of our churches rely on music as a part of the liturgy to lift up the name of Jesus in praise and worship. The Bible shows us many examples of how song was related to faith, with cymbals and horns, stringed instruments and voices. Worship without music? Neither of us could conceive of such a thing.

Through the course of my readings by black authors on the subject of Negro Spirituals and the Blues, I learned that through music blacks have preserved a history and continue to persevere through the legacy of slavery and oppression in this country. I began to look at music as a way of doing theology (perhaps a *theology of music* or a *theology of worship*, for example), as valid as other Western methods of thought and reason, of analysis and doctrine; yet with no evident separation between thought and bodily experiences.

As black theology must be experienced to be understood (Cone, 4), I did a lot of listening to tapes of various blues artists (i.e. Bessie Smith, Johnny Lee Hooker, and Billy Holiday). I also tried my hand at composing a blues song: *Blue Jeremiah,* based on the trials of Jeremiah's prophetic calling (see appendix). I even bought an instruction book with a tape on some of the basics of blues guitar, by B.B. King, my blues idol. According to B.B., "what you *don't* play is just as important as what you *do* play."

But in order to really play the blues, or just appreciate them, one has to understand the circumstances through which they emerged - one has to understand the suffering and oppression unique to the black experience under the weight of racism.

Ultimately, one has to live these experiences.

II. Music and the Struggle for Human Dignity

> *O my fathers, what was it like to be stripped of all supports of life save the beating of the heart and the ebb and flow of fetid air into the lungs? In a strange moment, when you suddenly caught your breath, did some intimation from the future give to your spirits a hint of promise? In the darkness did you hear the silent feet of your children beating a melody of freedom to words which you would never know, in a land in which your bones would be warmed again in the depths of the cold earth in which you will sleep unknown, unrealized and alone? -- Howard Thurman (p. 6).*

In his book: *The Spirituals and the Blues,* James Cone provides an excellent overview of the evolution of black music, a music which is deeply rooted in African culture.

> In Africa and America, black music was not an artistic creation for its own sake; it was directly related to daily life, work and play. Song was an expression of the community's view of the world and its existence in it. Through music, Africans recorded their history, initiated the young into adulthood, and expressed their religious beliefs. When Africans were enslaved in America, they brought with them their culture as defined by their music (Cone, 30).

In the midst of the inhumane treatment they endured as black slaves, the first African Americans survived partially through song. The unifying nature of a shared song, made grueling days in the cotton fields more bearable. It became almost a kind of language by which black people could express themselves, and their religion. It's not always clear as to exactly when or how black music evolved in the U.S.; but researchers are fairly certain that the *spirituals* were some of the most early forms of African American music. The spirituals were built upon the rich African heritage of music, but were born out of a new religion: Christianity, which was imposed upon most slaves upon arrival in the U.S.

In those days, white people didn't recognize the Negro as a human being - as a whole person; they did not even have the basic dignity of claiming their own names. In the television series *Roots* there is a powerful scene in which the captured Mandinka warrior Kunta Kinte is severely whipped for refusing to accept the name given to him by his new master. After several minutes he gives in and says, "My name is Toby." The camera pans out across the faces of the other slaves standing around watching in silence the conquering of a spirit.

But in religion, blacks found a kind of affirmation - a sense of belonging to a community - to God's kingdom. This was a place where they could deny being conquered, because God was 'on their side.' At least in God's eyes they knew they counted, and that they were God's children. "Because religion defined the *somebodiness* of their being, black slaves could retain a sense of the dignity of their person even though they were treated as things." (Cone, 17).

Speaking out of my own context, as a concerned white person wanting to understand what went on, I was probably the most shocked by the brutalities of our country's past, the lynchings and the genocide (much like one is most horrified by the millions of Jews who were slaughtered under the Third Reich, rather than the horror of human compliance and deception). It's was a surprise then to learn that what usually hurt the most was not the physical blows, but the silence of the bystander and the tearing apart of families at the auction block.

> ...it is the loss of community that constitutes the major burden. Suffering is not too much to bear, if there are brothers and sisters to go down in the valley to pray with you... ...The actual physical brutalities of slavery were minor in comparison to the loss of the community (Cone, 58,59).

And so much of black theology adopted themes of 'liberation' and 'hope' from the Bible.

Black people were (and still are) *Exodus People,* who believed that God would liberate them, just as God had freed Israel from bondage in Egypt. This led to a theology of hope for justice to be served in the future.

> The theological assumption of black slave religion as expressed in the spirituals was that *slavery contradicts God,* and *God will therefore liberate black people* (Cone, 65).

> Hope, in the black spirituals, is not a denial of history. Black hope accepts history, but believes that the historical is in motion, moving toward a divine fulfillment. It is the belief that things can be radically otherwise than they are: that reality is not fixed, but is moving in the direction of human liberation (Cone, 86).

As time passed, the spirituals were brought into the church as *gospel* music. But not all blacks bought into the white folks' religion. For them, religion didn't take seriously the trials of daily life. These black people developed the *blues,* a more gritty, scandalous kind of music, and often sang about sex, death, and the hypocrisy of the church. While the church folk had an outlet on Sunday morning for expressing their faith, the blues people had Saturday night to "let it all hang out." Both were done through song, and both had similarities and differences. One writer describes the blues singer in almost religious terms: "The whole being of the singer was engaged in intense spiritual expression, a crooning, crying, and moaning confession that left the blue soul washed clean at the blues altar." (Spencer, 112). However, scholars don't agree as to whether the blues were in opposition to gospel music, or whether they complemented one-another.

III. The God of Christianity

Oh well it's our Father who art in heaven
The preacher owed me ten dollars, he paid me seven.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
If I hadn't took the seven Lord I wouldn't have gotten none.
--from "You Shall" by Frank Stokes. (Spencer, 44).

> *"Sometimes the best Christian in the world have the blues quicker than a sinner do, 'cause the average sinner ain't got nothing to worry about... ...But a Christian is obliged to certain things and obligated not to do certain things. That sometimes cause a Christian to take the blues. What is the blues, then? It's a worried mind". -- Rev. Rubin Lacy (Spencer, 124).*

It must be remembered that Christianity was forced upon black slaves, and was used to condone slavery, based on various scripture verses (i.e. Eph. 6:5). It seems surprising then that many slaves adopted Christianity and genuinely grew in faith. They could not accept however, that God intended for them to be slaves. Rather, their doctrine of God became self-affirming to them. The religion which was to pacify them into accepting their lot in life instead galvanized them as a people awaiting liberation.

Still, I am troubled as I think about the ways in which suffering has been romanticized by the church. Suffering is to be expected as a part of the Christian life. But when addressing African American suffering through European American eyes, one must be aware of the fine line between 1) wanting to stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed *for the sake of truth and the gospel,* and 2) causing further damage to black people by promoting a theology of suffering (like the theology of the cross) to justify their experience of suffering *based on the color of their skin!* Black philosopher and theologian

Howard Thurman spoke of how the early slave church responded to Christianity:

> With untutored hands - with a sure artistry and genius created out of a vast vitality, a concept of God was wrenched from the Sacred Book, the Bible, the chronicle of a people who had learned through great necessity the secret meaning of suffering. This total experience enabled them to reject annihilation and affirm a terrible right to live. The center of focus was beyond themselves in a God who was a companion to them in their miseries even as He enabled them to transcend their miseries. And this is good news! (Thurman, 41).

What did Thurman mean: the *secret meaning of suffering?* My guess is that it has something to do with Jesus' call to "lose yourself, for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel." (Mk. 8:35) - that in our suffering, somehow Jesus is there to provide hope and strength to endure, if we only would put our trust in God. This ability to *transcend their miseries* came in the teachings of heaven.

> Heaven was a place - it was not merely an idea in the mind. This must be held in mind, constantly. The thinking about it is spatial. It is the thinking of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. "I go to prepare a place for you..." ...Heaven was as intensely personal as the facts of their experience or as the fact of the judgment. Here at last was a place where the slave was counted in. He had the dignity of personal registration (Thurman, 48-49).

Many church people adopted a 'reap what you sow' attitude toward the blues people "insist[ing] that the misfortune of blues people [was] none other than divine retribution for their living outside God's omnipotent protection as mediated through the church." (Spencer, 26). But the blues people believed "that the devil [was] occasionally the cause of the ill-fated suffering of blues people." (Spencer, 26).

Some people believed that the blues were a part of the lives of church folk *and* blues folk (as we read in the quote by Rev. Lacy, at the beginning of this section). Cone also emphasizes the similarities of the two:

> Both the spirituals and the blues are the music of black people. They should not be pitted against each other, as if they are alien or radically different. One does not represent good and the other bad, one sacred and the other secular. Both partake of the *same* black experience in the United States (Cone, 129).

Spencer, however, sees the blues as a falling away into sin "from an invisible Jesus to woman whom he could behold and hold... [which] comprised the fall of Bluesman Adam [and Blueswoman Eve]." (Spencer, 121). Most blacks usually returned full circle to the church as forgiven prodigal sons and daughters. "The blues singer's shift to spirituals and gospel was not a moral judgment that blues was profane. It was the testimony of a man putting away the toys of blues life and rising from the fall." (Spencer, 128). In other words, you might say it was kind of that rebellion stage.

IV. The "Blues God"

Sometimes I feel like nothin', somethin' th'owed away,
Sometimes I feel like nothin', somethin' th'owed away,
Then I get my guitar and play the blues all day.
(Cone, 123).

Blues ain't nothin' but a good man feelin' bad. -- Edwin Buster Pickens (Spencer, 123).

In a way, the blues has served the same function that, say, country music has served in white society. Many country singers have songs about sex and whiskey and what it feels like to win or lose; but not only songs with superficial lyrics, but songs which touch many of our deepest emotions. People listen to the music which speaks to their needs in the here and now. This is what blues music did for blacks during the turn of the century, and beyond with the development of jazz, rock & roll, rhythm & blues, soul, disco, and rap music. And it would seem that these kinds of music are most popular when the church is least effective in telling the truth in worship and in song.

> The orthodox-Christian attitude of the church has rejected too much. It has refused to accept the shadow side of God - which is the "blues god" - and has rejected the permissive side of God's personality. The church has insisted upon holiness and "sanctification" and has neglected to realize that wholeness is partly arrived at through unwholeness (Spencer, 23).

Obviously, blues music filled a void - it served as a therapeutic means of getting washed clean at the *"blues altar."* Much of contemporary music serves the same purpose. Thus, the blues god is still very present in much of today's culture. What should be the church's attitude toward the blues god?

V. Conclusion

As this church strives to become more multi-cultural, I hope we can affirm the music of the many diverse cultures in our society; because music is a way of doing theology. In that sense it cannot be confused with the gospel. Yet even Martin Luther spoke highly of music, putting it second only to the Word of God! Through the study of the theology of music, we may learn more about our own Lutheran identity and heritage. And, as we become more familiar with another people's traditions, we suddenly (and paradoxically) begin to understand ourselves more fully.

This J-Term was merely a beginning. Though music wasn't an end in itself, it did serve as a beginning in building relationships between myself and African Americans. For the future of the church, I hope that we may continue to strive to be relevant and reforming. Churches that are mostly concerned with carrying on tradition do not affirm the contemporary reality of the people of God. And they will turn elsewhere. Does this constitute a loss of faith? Cone doesn't think so. "It is not that the blues reject God; rather, they *ignore* God by embracing the joys and sorrows of life." (Cone, 99). The only problem I have with it is that if we end up baptizing every secular artist without discernment, we have only relativized the Word of God. And if the church refuses to articulate the gospel in relevant and meaningful ways, then the gospel itself is at stake. I am not saying that the Word of God cannot be heard outside the walls of the church. What I am saying is that the church must speak a word of truth to the reality of its people, and music may be one means toward that end. The blues provide a reminder of that truth.

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Appendix

BLUE JEREMIAH

1. One day God came and said, Jeremiah, I knew you before you was born. (x2)
   I'm gonna send you to be my prophet,
   Tell the people to mourn.

2. Go and tell my people. Tell them they been doin' me wrong (x2)
   They been chasin' after other gods,
   For far too long.

3. I said, hold everything, Lord. You don't understand. (x2)
   You know I'm just barely out of high school.
   You want a full-grown man.

4. He put his word in my mouth, and said there ain't no need to be afraid. (x2)
   You got to tell my people,
   about the coming judgment day.

5. They knocked me down on the ground threw me in jail and threw away key (x2)
   And even though I'm feelin' all alone,
   I know that God is here with me.

6. I try to hold it up inside me, but I am weary of holdin' it in.
   If I say I ain't gonna talk about my Lord,
   You know that's my greatest sin.

7. Cursed be the day I was born, Mama cry, Mama cry for me. (x2)
   Ain't nobody listnin',
   Listnin' to my story.

8. God is comin' to the people, comin' in a way like you ain't ever seen. (x2)
   It won't be just the Israelites,
   But every man, boy, woman and girl;
   Red blue yellow and black, and white and green.