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ESSAY REVIEW I

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE BLACK CHURCH

Angelique C. Harris*

Gary David Comstock, *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. Pp. 296. Cloth \$24.95.

Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006. Pp. 240. Cloth \$24.00.

G. Winston James and Lisa C. Moore, eds., *Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity*. Washington, DC: Redbone Press, 2006. Pp. 391. Cloth \$16.95.

Black churches' battle with homosexuality is nothing new. In the fall of 1929, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor of one of the best known black churches in the United States, Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, launched a campaign against homosexuality and other "vices" in the African American community.¹ In his 1939 autobiography, Powell claimed that his motivation for this campaign was to protect the African American family.² According to Powell, homosexuality was an alarming social trend that greatly threatened American families with men leaving their spouses for other men, and women choosing to never marry and instead engaging in relationships with other women. Powell wrote, "Why did I preach against homosexuality and all manner of sex perversions? Because, as every informed person knows, these sins are on the increase and are threatening to eat the vitals out of America."³ For years, Powell, and later his son and successor, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., condemned homosexuality as a sin and used biblical passages to support their views. In fact, in an attempt to get Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to call off a civil rights protest planned for the Democratic national convention in Los Angeles in August 1960, Powell, Jr., who was also the Democratic congressman from Harlem, threatened to spread the rumor that Dr. King and Bayard Rustin, who was an important

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advisor for King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), were lovers. The charge was untrue, but Rustin, who was homosexual, was forced to resign his SCLC position.⁴

Today, all seven of the historically African American Protestant denominations—the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated (NBC), the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA), the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC)—still view homosexuality as “an abomination” and do not see it as an acceptable “lifestyle.”⁵ Almost eighty years have passed since Powell's crusade, and black church leaders and congregants continue to struggle with homosexuality in their churches. These struggles became a matter of life and death in the early 1980s when African American male congregants, pastors, choir directors, and organists began to die from mysterious forms of cancer and pneumonia which later became known as the autoimmune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS.

AIDS and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) have disproportionately affected the African American community.⁶ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, African Americans currently account for almost half of all HIV/AIDS diagnoses and a majority of all AIDS deaths.⁷ One of the reasons cited for the higher rates of HIV/AIDS within the African American community is the delayed response of black community leaders to this epidemic. AIDS was originally identified as a “gay disease” and was initially described in the media as “GRIDS,” or gay-related immune deficiency syndrome.⁸ Not only were gay men, and most visibly white gay men, becoming infected with AIDS, but also intravenous drug addicts and prostitutes—people considered “immoral” and “degenerates” by black religious leaders as well as many in the larger society. Dating back to the era of slavery, black church leaders, and the black church as a social and cultural institution, have served as freedom fighters and supporters of social justice for oppressed African Americans. As a result of the churches' role within the African American community, a number of black gay men, as well as the thousands of heterosexual African Americans infected with AIDS, expected black church leaders to openly address the epidemic in the black community and come to the spiritual aid of those dying from the disease.⁹ Yet, in the early and mid-1980s, these afflicted people were only met with scorn and disapproval at the “lifestyle” which religious leaders believed led to individuals becoming infected. Unfortunately, many gay men and others who died from AIDS were not allowed to be buried by their home churches. This scornful practice has led many lesbians and gay men, as well as a growing number of social scientists, theologians, and historians, to examine the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of African American lesbians and gays, and how black churches respond to

the issue of homosexuality.

From the late 19th century, scholars noted the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of African Americans in general.¹⁰ In his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois offered a highly influential analysis of the social issues facing African Americans in the early 20th century.¹¹ Yet, many of these problems, as well as Du Bois's prescriptions for dealing with them, still resonate today. In his text Du Bois touched upon important issues such as class divisions, education, and religion, and emphasized the important role the black church played in the African American advancement.¹² For southern black migrants separated from their families in the late 19th and early 20th century, northern black churches served as a welcoming home in a strange and often hostile environment. Since African Americans were denied access to public space and civic institutions, the black church served as everything from a school to a bank to a community center. More importantly, the black church has fought and still continues to fight racial discrimination and oppression.¹³

The vast majority of African Americans identify themselves as religious. For example, in the early 1990s a national survey found that 84 percent of African Americans considered themselves religious, with 74 percent believing that the church was very important, and 70 percent indicating they were members of a church.¹⁴ This high level of religiosity is also manifested in the African American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. In 2002 the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force published *Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: The Black Pride Survey*.¹⁵ Over 2,600 African Americans who identified as LGBT took part in this survey in 2000, making this the largest sampling of that group ever undertaken. The surveys were administered during "Black Pride" events in cities across the country such as New York, Washington, DC, Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles.¹⁶ The researchers gathered an enormous amount of data on this population, including political affiliation, views on homophobia and racial discrimination, and information concerning religious beliefs; and found that among those sampled, approximately 52 percent reported that they were either constantly or "somewhat" influenced by the beliefs of their church or religious institution. This figure was significantly lower than that for heterosexual African Americans.

There has been an increasing number of books and articles published that examine homosexuality in African American communities, but most of these works simply have a chapter or a section on the black church such as Delroy Constantine-Simms's *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in African American Communities*, Michael Eric Dyson's essay in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, or Keith Boykin's *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*.¹⁷ There are also books that examine the larger issue of sexuality in the African American community such as *Black Sexual Politics* by Patricia

Hill Collins, or explore sexual issues in the black church such as *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* by Kelly Brown Douglas, and Susan Newman's *Oh God!: A Black Woman's Guide to Sex and Spirituality*. However, these books contain only brief discussions of homosexuality and the black church.¹⁸ Jeffrey S. Siker's 1994 edited volume on homosexuality in the black church was one of the earliest significant texts to fully address the issue and offer a variety of perspectives. Although there are a growing number of articles that explore homosexuality in the church (and these most often examine religiosity among African American LGBT people as it relates to AIDS), there are few books on the topic.¹⁹ The African American non-profit AIDS organization, The Balm in Gilead, published in 1997 *Though I Stand at the Door and Knock: Discussions on the Black Church's Struggle with Homosexuality and AIDS*. This volume featured essays, speeches, and discussions by researchers Mindy Thompson and Robert E. Fullilove, philosopher Cornel West, social activist Phil Wilson, and Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.²⁰ These authors, as well as Patricia Hill Collins and Kelly Brown Douglas, agree that the discomfort with homosexuality among black church leaders stems in large part from their discomfort with human sexuality in general.²¹

Negative perceptions and beliefs about the African American body, or Africans' sexuality in general, helped fuel the conservative stance of many black churches and communities towards what they considered sexual "depravity."²² This conservatism has its basis in slavery and the history of African Americans in the Americas.²³ African Americans have been trying to distance themselves from deviant forms of sexual expression for over a hundred years, and this led to the denials of homosexuality in the African American community, and extremely homophobic beliefs on the part of black churches.²⁴ Thus, homosexuality is not the root of the homophobia within African American communities and churches, but it is sexuality in general, or "deviant sexuality," as well as the oppression that African Americans faced historically at the hands of whites surrounding issues of sexuality. Cornel West has argued that the dual fascination and repulsion that whites have had with the black body influenced the perceived acceptability of enslaving it.²⁵ Kelly Brown Douglas maintains that whites' distorted views about black sexuality made enslavement more acceptable.²⁶ Whites' negative perceptions about African American sexuality also affected the ways African Americans saw themselves. And it is also clear that black church leaders were directly influenced by these white perceptions.

Social theorist Michel Foucault argued that all forms of sexual oppression are based in power struggles; by oppressing the body and sexuality of another individual, control is enacted over her or him. Utilizing Foucault's observation, Kelly Brown Douglas argues that African Americans, especially the churchgoing, took an extremely conservative stance towards sexuality and sexual depravity as a way of freeing themselves from their white oppressors and proving

the legitimacy of their sexuality. Similar to Douglas's work, Patricia Hill Collins and Cornel West discussed the links between sexual and gender discrimination and homophobia, and how the black middle class, especially church members, attempted to regain control over the black body and sexuality by emphasizing decency and "respectability."²⁷

Similar to the works by Douglas and West is Horace L. Griffin's *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches*. Griffin, an Episcopal priest and a teacher of pastoral theology, provides a lively and fascinating examination of homosexuality in the black church.²⁸ Clearly written with black church leaders and other clergy in mind, Griffin meticulously picks apart the arguments used to condemn lesbians and gays. Among the topics discussed are "Historical Racism and Homophobia," "Constructions of Homophobia and Heterosexual Supremacy," "African Americans, the Bible, the Visible Institution, and Homosexuality," and "Black Church AIDS Ministry." In addition, Griffin examines the six or seven passages from the Bible that supposedly condemn homosexuality and offers alternative explanations and interpretations.²⁹ For example, Griffin spends time critically examining the writings of the apostle Paul, especially 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, "sodomites... will not inherit the kingdom of God."³⁰ Whereas black ministers often zero in on this passage, Griffin points out that they conveniently ignore the passages where Paul endorses the practice of slavery.

Their Own Receive Them Not is well researched and a useful resource for African American clergy and researchers interested in this topic. Griffin notes that many African Americans perceived homosexuality to be the behavior of the "other" (mainly whites), whose sexual perversion spilled over into the African American community, and that homosexuality did not exist in African societies historically.³¹ To shed light on the latter view, Griffin cites *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, edited by Will Roscoe and Stephen O. Murray, which records numerous instances of homosexuality in Africa.³² Roscoe and Murray note that many scholars have claimed that historically homosexuality was a European and Arab import, something that colonized Africans tolerated or were forced to accept. As late as the early 20th century, some white scholars believed that African Americans represented "uncivilized man," were "close to nature," and did not practice "unnatural sex acts" such as homosexuality.³³

Griffin's *Their Own Receive Them Not* provides background information on homosexuality in the African American community, examines African American LGBT churches, and discusses ways in which the teachings of "liberation theology" can aid black church leaders in overcoming their homophobia and heterosexism by emphasizing love and acceptance. One flaw in Griffin's discussion is that it reads as if all black churches are homophobic, though to be fair, this book is directed towards those church leaders who condemn

homosexuality, or for those who might want to confront homophobia within their congregations.

Another text that explores homosexuality and the black church is Gary David Comstock's *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations*.³⁴ This is a refreshing study in that it is comprised of a series of twenty interviews with African American religious leaders and examines how certain churches receive LGBT congregants. A sociologist and University Chaplain at Wesleyan University, Comstock begins with a brief description of each respondent and provides a transcription of the interview, but there is no analysis of the interviews, which is both a weakness and a strength. Whereas Horace Griffin explains where homophobia in the church originates and provides useful information on how to overcome it, Comstock lets the pastors explain for themselves, asking such thought-provoking questions as: "For you, what is it about the Roman Catholic tradition and theology that creates the opportunity to be open to lesbians and gay men?" "If new people have trouble with cross-dressing, transgendered, lesbian, or gay people, how do you get them to stay and deal with it rather than leave?" And "Why do you think you have been able to be one of the people who has stood up to the issue of homophobia in the church and to ask the difficult questions?"³⁵ Almost all of the responses are very affirming, and these pastors and other religious leaders explain the lengths they go to make sure that lesbian and gay congregants feel at ease and supported.

Comstock is also not afraid to challenge these religious leaders. For example, Comstock asks Rev. Amos C. Brown, Senior Pastor of a Baptist church in San Francisco: "Would you ever perform a gay marriage in your church?"³⁶ Brown responds, "To be quite candid, at this point in history, no." "How would a gay man or a lesbian know that they were welcome in your church?" Comstock asks. Brown then mentioned that the pastor from Metropolitan Community Church, a predominantly gay congregation, was invited to preach at his church.³⁷ Brown goes on to explain his opposition to same-sex marriage because of the use of "traditional terms to affirm a non-traditional lifestyle."³⁸ Comstock asks Rev. Menyweather-Woods: "Is homosexuality a sin?" The minister responds that any sex which is "against God" is a sin. Comstock then asks: "How can a gay man or lesbian not be sinful? Do they have to abstain from having sex, or is there a way for them to lead a faithful life?"³⁹

Comstock also found that many pastors refused to address the issue of homosexuality for fear that members of the congregation would be offended and leave the church. Other pastors have not had much of a problem with people leaving their congregations, and believe that given time, the congregations came to accept lesbians and gays as fellow congregants because in most instances, "the pastor sets the tone."⁴⁰ However, this is not always the case. In March 2007 *The New York Times* reported that for many pastors, accepting lesbians and gays

within their congregations meant losing heterosexual congregants.⁴¹ According to this article, at one church in Atlanta, after a pastor voiced his support of homosexuals, he saw his membership shrink from 6,000 to 3,000. Comstock does show that there are a number of black church leaders who do work to welcome LGBT people within their congregations and provides hope that the tide of homophobia within the black church may be beginning to change.

Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity is a compilation of essays, poems, and narratives each detailing the religious and spiritual identity of its author.⁴² Poet, fiction writer, and the editor of a number of African American lesbian and gay publications G. Winston James, and Lisa C. Moore, the editor of Redbone Press, have included over forty thoughtfully-written pieces that explore African American lesbian and gay spirituality, each providing an intimate and revealing depiction of the author's search for a spiritual self. The well-written introduction to the volume by Rev. Irene Monroe places this important volume in context, pointing out that not just homosexuality, but human sexuality has "never been a comfortable topic for discussion in the black community," a claim that both Griffin and a number of Comstock's interviewees had made.⁴³ Yet, it is this difficulty that black church leaders have in addressing or even understanding sexuality that has alienated lesbians and gays from many more traditional black congregations that have refused to accept them.

Spirited illustrates that in their search for spiritual confirmation and religious support, a number of African American lesbians and gays have sought solace outside of the mainstream black churches. The contributors to *Spirited* practice a variety of different religious beliefs in addition to the Protestant Christianity, including Buddhism, Haitian Voodoo, and even Shamanism. As noted above, Battle and his colleagues found in their study of African American LGBT people that 54 percent of respondents reported that their religious institution did not approve of their sexuality.⁴⁴ Moreover, a vast majority of respondents who reported that their religious faith was supportive of their homosexuality were not members of the traditional black churches, and the "most religious" in the sample were those who followed "other religions." This underscores the significance of spirituality in the lives of the majority of African Americans, including African American gays and lesbians.

Comstock's *A Whosoever Church*, Griffin's *Their Own Received Them Not* by Horace L. Griffin, and James and Moore's *Spirited* are much needed and welcome additions to the conversation on homosexuality and the black church. These are three very different books, but they all reach the same conclusion—spirituality and inclusion within the black church is invaluable in the lives of many African American gays and lesbians, and this issue, whether they support or are against homosexuality, and this troubles many black congregations. Griffin presents a more historical examination and provided counterarguments to the biblical interpretations used to condemn homosexuality, but also points out how

African American gays and lesbians are finding their own places within black churches, and in some cases, forming their own churches. Comstock explores how black church leaders are making lesbians and gays feel accepted within their congregations, while James and Moore's perspectives on African American lesbian and gay spirituality illustrates its importance in their lives, a topic that is quite uplifting. Most of the research on LGBT African Americans, particularly on gay men, emphasizes HIV/AIDS, unsafe sex, and "the down low." More research and studies such as the ones reviewed here are needed on the lives and loves of African American lesbians and gay men—books that can be both enlightening and affirming.

NOTES

¹Kevin McGruder, "Lifting Up a Standard for the People: Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.'s, Crusade Against Abnormal Vice in 1920s Harlem," unpublished paper (2004).

²Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., *Against the Tide: An Autobiography*, (New York, 1938), 209–20.

³*Ibid.*, 216.

⁴V. P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African American Intellectual Tradition* (New York, 1995), 309–11; John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York, 2003), 297–99.

⁵Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland, OH, 2006).

⁶Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago, IL, 1999).

⁷Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "HIV/AIDS and African Americans" (7 December 7, 2007.) <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/aa/index.htm>.

⁸Randy Shiltz, *And the Band Played on* (New York, 1987); www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/aa/resources/factsheets/aa.htm.

⁹Harlon L. Dalton, "AIDS in Blackface," *Daedalus* 118 (Summer 1989): 205–27.

¹⁰Franklin E. Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (1964; reprinted New York: 1969); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprinted Mineola, NY, 1994).

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York, 2001); Mary Pattillo-McCoy, "Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community," *American Sociological Review* 63 (December 1998): 767–84; Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (New York, 1990).

¹³There is a debate as to how progressive the black church actually is. Though some black churches took the lead in organizing the civil rights campaigns, many African American religious leaders and congregants wanted to take a less aggressive approach to fighting for equality. Such debates encouraged Martin Luther King, Jr., and other religious leaders to separate from NBC and form the Progressive National Baptist Convention in 1961. However, there were many Black churches that actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement and fought for African American equality.

¹⁴Andrew Billingsley and Cleopatra Howard Caldwell, "The Church, the Family, and the School in the African American Community," *The Journal of Negro Education* 60 (Fall 1991): 427–40.

¹⁵Juan Battle, Cathy Cohen, Dorian Warren, Gerard Ferguson, and Suzette Audam, *Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud* (New York, 2002).

¹⁶Black Pride events are African American LGBT events/festivals held throughout the United States.

¹⁷Michael Eric Dyson, "When You Divide Body and Soul, Problems Multiply: The Black Church and Sex," in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Bloomington, IN, 2001), 308–26; Delroy Constantine-Simms, "Is Homosexuality the Greatest Taboo?" in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. D. Constance-Simms (Los Angeles, 2001), 78–87; Keith Boykin, *One More River to Cross* (New York, 1997).

- ¹⁸Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York, 2004); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY, 2003); Susan Newman, *Oh God! A Black Woman's Guide to Sex and Spirituality* (New York, 2002).
- ¹⁹Jeffrey S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, KY, 1994).
- ²⁰Mindy Fullilove and Robert E. Fullilove, III, "Homosexuality and the African American Church; The Paradox of the 'Open Closet,'" in *Though I Stand at the Door and Knock: Discussions on the Black Church's Struggle with Homosexuality and AIDS*, ed. Julia Walker (New York, 1997), 1–12.
- ²¹Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*; and Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*.
- ²²Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*; Cornel West, "The Black Church beyond Homophobia" in *Though I Stand at the Door and Knock: Discussions on the Black Church's Struggle with Homosexuality and AIDS*, ed. Julia Walker (New York, 1997), 13–20.
- ²³Ibid.
- ²⁴Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*.
- ²⁵Cornel West, "The Black Church beyond Homophobia."
- ²⁶Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*.
- ²⁷See, for example, Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004); and Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), 45.
- ²⁸Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches*. In 2001, Griffin published an essay by the same name. Horace L. Griffin, "Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches," in Constance-Sims, *The Greatest Taboo*, 118–23.
- ²⁹Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not*, 65.
- ³⁰Ibid., 71.
- ³¹Dwight McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch* (New York, 2005); Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC, 2000).
- ³²Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (New York, 1998).
- ³³Ibid.
- ³⁴Comstock, Gary David, *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations* (Louisville, KY, 2001).
- ³⁵Ibid., 182, 146, 222.
- ³⁶Ibid., 38.
- ³⁷Metropolitan Community Church is a LGBT organized Christian church.
- ³⁸Comstock, *A Whosoever Church*, 39.
- ³⁹Ibid., 25.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., 10.
- ⁴¹Neela Banerjee. "For Some Black Pastors, Accepting Gay Members Means Losing Others." *New York Times*, 27 March 2007; www.nytimes.com/2007/03/27/us/27churches.html.
- ⁴²G. Winston James and Lisa C. Moore, eds. *Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity* (Washington, DC, 2006).
- ⁴³Ibid., xxi.
- ⁴⁴Battle, et al., *Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud*.