

The 2009-2010 Season is proudly presented by
Star Tribune, Minnesota Monthly and Minnesota Public Radio

BLACK NATIVITY: A SEASON FOR CHANGE

**By T. Mychael Rambo
and Lou Bellamy**

**Directed by Dominic Taylor
Presented by Target**

**December 3 - December 27, 2009
Previews December 1 & 2**

Religion and Cultural Cohesion

While perhaps ironic given the history of Christianity in the Americas, it is no surprise that black people have long found refuge in the church. Within the brutal, terrorist regime that was New World, religion eventually came to represent an effort to balance the ferocity of slavery, running contrary to a cornucopia of corporeal violence exacted on black people. From the early colonial period in this hemisphere, Europeans sought to spread Christianity; its doctrines were tightly woven into both conquering the New World and the establishment of an unparalleled institutionalized project of slavery that would grow and prosper for five centuries. It is critical to understanding the philosophical underpinnings of the creation of this nation that we explore the religiosity of the early explorers, missionaries and colonists. The language used to frame colonization of the New World also informed the Declaration of Independence and helped pen the U.S. Constitution. To regard religion as a separate enterprise than the construction of this nation or the development of the New World is to seriously deflate the historical record. Framing the black experience without consideration to the theological currents running through the culture would be to analyze history within a vacuum. We would miss much of the development of a sense of self-awareness, the covert activity that supported a rich tradition of activism and protest, and most certainly a resounding sense of hope for a better tomorrow. To that end, let us retrace some important steps that helped this country come into focus during its early years.

Early explorers and missionaries deemed it their divine mission to civilize the so-called heathen peoples of the world. This was called manifest destiny.¹ Upon entering the New World, having encountered literally millions of indigenous people who, despite elaborate evidence of their spirituality, the early explorers deemed godless, the colonists set about a major effort to convert and thereby “save” the souls of the “heathen tribes.” Even as colonists attempted to enslave the native peoples of the Caribbean, Mexico and South America, many Europeans wanted to Christianize the indigenous peoples. Establishing a solid slave labor force amongst the native peoples of the Americas proved quite difficult for two reasons in particular: one, native people were dying rapidly and *en masse*, having been infected with the plagues of European disease brought to the New World via rats on ships. Various illnesses to which sailors had established relative immunity wreaked havoc on the fragile ecosystem of the New World. Colonists regarded these disastrous plagues a testament to their rightful ownership of the vast land in the New World. This is a powerful example of how religious ideology of the time

¹ For a complex and detailed Freudian analysis on the idea of manifest destiny as it pertains to the New World, Anne see McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). See especially the first chapter.

merged with the imperial project in the New World: it was interpreted as a spiritual intervention, the manifestation of a divinely ordained right to the land and its riches. The other major complication the Europeans faced was that native people were well-acquainted with the land and had the upper hand on the Europeans, both in terms of knowledge as to the terrain and navigational abilities in the Caribbean waters. In short, the few who survived plagues simply would not stay put, much to the dismay of the colonials. Given the enormity of the project developing the New World was, a large-scale, dependable workforce was needed, and quickly.

Europe began an unparalleled effort to import what would eventually amount to an estimated 10 to 20 million Africans who would deforest, develop and work the lucrative plantations. European reasoning declared Africans a heartier bunch than the people indigenous to the area. Indeed, imported African populations withstood both European and tropical diseases comparatively well.

Another hotly contested issue in European philosophical and legal circles revolved around the question of the African's soul. While early missionaries regarded the native people of the Americas as naïve children in need of protection and guidance, a trope of brutal bestiality accompanied black African people. According to colloquial opinion, indigenous people were simple, trusting, in need of protection; they were salvageable. Upon realizing their value as a free labor force, the Africans were described as a brutish race, whose inherent tendencies toward disobedience, viciousness and even cannibalism, necessitated the order of slavery in order to save them from themselves. Also, Christians could not enslave other Christians according to the foundations of the faith. Thus Africans were relegated to an ambiguous and oxymoronic existence; they were not human, they were not exactly beasts, they were somewhere in between. Whatever they were, they were beyond salvation, and therefore justly enslaved.² Government officials and land proprietors with a vested interest in the rich economy of the plantations fought the indoctrination of black people into the church. They did not want to surrender such a wildly lucrative project.

Yet even as some found the idea of indoctrinating slave populations threatening, the church also seemed to provide colonists with a forum for orientation, a primary stop along the trajectory of "seasoning" new slaves underwent.³ The goals of the seasoning process were twofold: the first was to acclimate new slaves to their surroundings including basic language acquisition, lay of the land and laws to abide; the second goal was to break any rebellious spirit

² For further reading see Robin Blackburn's *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800*. (New York: Verso, 1997). The author provides a well tracked, trans-continental analysis of the historical record as the colonies were established in the New World.

³ See Sue Peabody's "'A Dangerous Zeal': Catholic Missions to Slaves in the French Antilles, 1635-1800." *French Historical Studies* 25:1 (2002) 53-90.

that would encourage newcomers to incite trouble amongst the senior populations. Seasoning was a brutal, confusing and critical feature of the slave system. The church quickly found its custodial role as a trusted establishment with the potential to assuage fear, enforce law and keep track of developing allegiances between slaves. The debate as to the souls of slaves was swept under the rug as the church proved its worth in keeping slave populations complacent and content.

Of course the slaves who attended churches in the New came already imbued with strong ideologies about life, spirituality and the order of the world. As time went on and the “civilizing mission” gained momentum, these original African spiritual systems from various regions of Africa would blend covertly with Christian traditions, forming new comprehensions of faith and spirituality. In these churches African slaves began to underwrite the teachings of the Catholic priests and missionaries with their own interpretations of the word, of the saints and the stories as told by the scriptures. Imbued with century old epistemological knowledge, they began to make their own meaning out of what they were being taught.⁴ Thus the churches, albeit entirely by accident, began to articulate, perambulate and sustain an underground, subversive culture that allowed for a sense of cultural cohesion, creativity, and autonomy that would threaten the very foundation of the colonial presence in the New World.⁵ Black slaves came together to get news of loved ones on other plantations, to get news from the Old World, both Europe and Africa. They shared stories about plantation masters and families, of how various plantations were run, who the sentries were and what habits they maintained. They got and spread word about the major ideological crises and shifts within Europe that would soon usher in the French Revolution.⁶ They shared stories of uprisings, of protest, of revolution. Since the middle of the 16th century, the church was established as a place of refuge, community, spiritual sustenance, creativity, and strength for black people in the New World.

⁴ Still one of the most valuable analyses of Creole or New World systems of spirituality and religiosity is Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage, 1984).

⁵ Carolyn Fick makes excellent use of the Creole systems of meaning-making that were established in the New World and nicely relates these frameworks to a growing revolutionary spirit. See her book *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990.

⁶ For a more detailed account of the covert meetings at least pertaining to the francophone Caribbean, more specifically the colony of Saint Domingue, see Carolyn Fick’s *The Making of Haiti*, *ibid*.

Making Meaning: The Context for Conversion

Religious faith for black folks speaks to a need to take care of one another to make everyone better. It addresses the need to believe in something greater, something beyond the ceaselessness of injustice and oppression in the earthly world. In addition to providing a downtrodden folk with hope, the church also became a place to establish order, exact rituals of society otherwise denied to black people, such as marriages, funerals, and other rites of passage. In the church there was both accountability and forgiveness. There was penance and salvation. There was order. Things made sense. It addressed a serious need for explanation where things seemed unjust, unfair or illogical. It managed to alleviate severe senses of loss, grief and disappointment. It spoke to a need for community and consistency. Finally, it fortified a society in need of leadership and respectfully ordered a community in which elders are honored and the experience-wizened could be appreciated. The church, therefore, became a place for black folks to recreate a world in which they mattered, in which their experiences were valid, their living important, their relationships and talents celebrated. In short, it was a place to revitalize those deadened by the force of slavery.

The tradition of “testifying” is a powerful one within the black community, especially for black Christians in the United States. A kind of exercise in truth telling, to speak the word before an audience of one’s family, community or church was a powerful means by which black people affirmed one another, their knowledge—which is often contested by the larger, dominant and oppressive society (e.g. someone might say, “there is racism in the world,” and though it is broadly true, it can and has been contested. In the absence of tangible, quantifiable proof, language becomes speculative, reducing the means by which we communicate and name our experiences (a powerful exercise) to indistinct and indefinite terminology, constantly in flux within the context of an irrational, disordered world.) The practice of “testifying” of speaking out, outloud, of naming an experience, “telling it like it is,” becomes critical to preserving a sense of identity, a sense of logic within the chaos of an oppressive society that exhibits manic behavior to protect its most devious, unjustifiable though often financially lucrative institutions. Simply the act of saying, “I have seen,” or “I know,” becomes revolutionary within a context wherein the mission of the controlling or dominant class is, in part, to break down any sense of independence or ownership of self, that would reject or counter the position of slave. There is no “I” within this kind of context, I does not belong to the speaker. “I” denotes a kind of control or freedom.

The black community then, in its call and response to the speaker, both encourages the speaking or telling, but also catches the speaker should he or she falter as the voice is used and the silence is broken. Speaking up takes practice, speaking as though one’s experience matters

and has relevance takes practice, the more one speaks and explains the world, translates it to make meaning and make it relevant, in their own words, the more that person will want to communicate with others, to talk, to name and order things according to his or her experience and developing worldview. The “amen-corner,” or those who speak back, are there to encourage, like revelers in a carnival they celebrate, but they are also like the patrons of a marathon, who with water and words of encouragement, place themselves strategically at mileposts where they can be close to the runners, offer them a cool drink or a shout to keep going when the path becomes steep or slippery, or even worse, disappears altogether. This, more than anything else, is at the heart of faith: a communal buoying up of its individual members for the greater good.