

Thoughts on Black Religion

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

On Monday, December 4, 2017, I hosted a showing of the documentary *Contradiction*, by Black atheist Jeremiah Camara. I appeared in the 2014 documentary that deals with theism – primarily Christianity – in the Black community.

The film was very well-received and there was a lively discussion that followed. Most of those in attendance were theists and two Afrocentric individuals had some defenses of theism. One man, a local college instructor, made several comments.

He did not like the title of the film. He pointed out that rather than a contradiction, Black religion is a paradox. That is to say, it might appear to be contradictory, but deeper thought reveals its conflicting truths.

I disagree. Religion in general and “holy” books in particular are filled with contradictions. Moreover, the main contradiction that the documentary sought to highlight was the large number of Black churches (estimated at 85,000) in the U.S. with the widespread poverty, suffering, ill health, etc. found among African Americans. If we spend so much time, money and prayer on spirituality, why are we at the bottom where the major quality of life indicators are concerned? *That* is a blatant contradiction.

However, I do speak of the paradox of religion by noting that the same religion that sustains life also destroys it. It frees some people and enslaves others. It encourages some to be selfish and others to be self-less. It makes some people violent and others nonviolent. Or as Forrest Gump, would say, it’s like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get. And that’s a very disturbing reality.

The college instructor also pointed out that it seemed that the documentarian was implying that everyone attracted to religion is primarily motivated by emotion. The man said that there was no discussion of scholars like Black

liberation theologian James Cone. He also discussed the fact that there is much scholarship among Jesuits, Baptists and numerous other religions.

There could have been more discussions of Black religious scholarship in the documentary. However, the documentary is from an atheist's perspective. I have examined much Black religious scholarship, and I have seen no persuasive evidence for the existence of God coming from any Black religious scholar or anyone else.

That leads to another point the instructor made. As he often does, he claimed that Africans are not strictly oriented toward science, reason and logic. Rather, they also know how to tap into a spiritual realm. Some might say this supposed African orientation is genetic. Others might say it is cultural. Still others might say it is a combination of the two.

However, is there any evidence that Africans can tap into a spiritual realm? The problem is that Afrocentrists and others distrust "logocentric" philosophies and "Western" science. Yet, how else can one verify these extraordinary claims? And if they cannot be verified, why should they be taken seriously?

The instructor also seemed skeptical of my contention that poor and uneducated people are more likely to believe in God than those that are better educated and more affluent. However, numerous studies show that this is the case. It does not mean that there are no poor and uneducated atheists and no educated middle-class believers. We are simply dealing with the likelihood of beliefs among the different groups.

The instructor pointed out that human beings are hardwired to believe in God, and this implies that God exists. However, there is no good reason to suppose that we are hardwired by *God*. On the contrary, we are hardwired by *evolution*. Most of us still believe in God because the belief has had survival value to us as a species. It helped bind groups together to ward off predators and enemies. It helps people to grieve and deal with the fear of death.

We human beings are also hardwired to look for design and intentionality, even when and where they do not exist. In primitive times it behooved human beings

to attribute noises in the forest or jungle to possible predators, even when there were no predators present. Better safe than sorry.

Human beings see order in the universe and mistake it for intelligent design. Pattern-seeking is part of what makes us human. As one writer pointed out, in a kind of cosmic joke, we have been hardwired by evolution to believe in Intelligent Design!

Another Afrocentrist noted that there was nothing in the film about Black preachers like Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser that used Christianity to launch slave rebellions. This is true. However, sadly, those slave rebellions *failed*, and simply raise Black philosopher William Jones' question, *Is God a White Racist?*

This Afrocentric audience member also implied that had this film been made during an earlier time, when Blacks were even more religious, we might have learned about the true power of Black spirituality in the U.S. However, Black people have been catching hell in the U.S. from the very beginning. Indeed, that is why more Black atheists are coming out of the closet these days. Prayer and religion have simply not brought Black people freedom, justice and equality.

The bottom line is that there is no strong evidence that there is a God that hears the prayers of Black people or anyone else. Human thought and action have been the only effective tools for achievement of any kind.