Religious discourse as public discourse

by

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The comparative study of intergroup relations in multi-ethnic and culturally pluralistic societies has begun to devote more attention to the role of religion in fostering cooperation and managing conflict. (See Lynn Walker Hantley, "Comparative Human Relations Conference," sponsored by the Southern Education Foundation and convened at Emory University, 1997). One area that deserves greater attention is the significant role of religion in mobilizing and sustaining protest movements aimed at expanding equal opportunity and racial justice. And, perhaps more importantly, we need to understand better the positive role religion can play in fostering a civil society in which diversity is valued.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, clergy and laypeople in South Africa and in the United States of America have led movements of democratic reform. The focus of this paper is upon the nature and impact of religious discourse, especially Christian preaching, in helping to expand and strengthen civil society. Drawing upon the experience of black churches in the United States, I will demonstrate the manner in which the preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. and thus, his Christian theology was thoroughly political without being sectarian, spiritual without being overly individualistic and pietistic and particular without disrespecting differing faith traditions. King's preaching and public action provides contemporary clergy with a model of prophetic Christian discourse that works for the common good and thereby, becomes public discourse about the nature of the good citizen and just society. By applying the social teachings of Jesus to the condition of race relations in America, King was willing to take risks on behalf of the common good. His preaching functioned in a mimetic fashion and thereby, became an example for other Christian preachers who sought to bring the resources of their faith to bear upon the social crisis.

Most Americans agree that Dr. King's sermon (oration) on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963 was the most memorable sermon of the twentieth century. I wonder, have South Africans yet heard the most important sermon of the century as it pertains to the future of the new nation? I will argue that preaching, the proclamation that occurs on a weekly basis in local congregations by women and men whether ordained or not, is an exceedingly potent congregation-based practice that can sustain movements for democratic reform. Preaching is an efficient mode of public discourse that accomplishes numerous significant tasks. Skillful, faithful preachers identify problems, analyze social discrepancies, articulate mass aspirations, declare the will of God, and offer hope to the oppressed.

After visiting South Africa on two occasions, and now serving as president of the largest black graduate theological seminary in the United States, it has been my good fortune to observe similarities and differences in the preaching craft of black and white ministers in both national contexts. In addition to this cross-cultural dimension of analysis, I will draw upon empirical data gleaned from national surveys of black preachers (C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, and Robert Franklin) to elucidate the nature of black Christian preaching as public discourse.

Among the guiding questions for discussion during the Multi-Event 99 are the following:

1. What message are preachers in South Africa currently proclaiming as it pertains to the future of
democracy and valuing diversity?
2. What are religious congregations saying about the Truth and Reconciliation process?
3. What is the state of religious broadcasting (radio and television) in South Africa today?
4. What role should theological seminaries, universities, and denominational training venues play in helping clergy to publicly "speak the truth in love"?
5. What new message is needed at this time in South Africa?
6. How effectively are the churches reaching young people in South Africa?
7. How can character education, values education, and good citizenship be taught and reinforced by religious congregations?

What is the difference between the preaching and religious discourse that occurs in local congregations and that of nationally recognized leaders such as Bishop Tutu and Dr. Boesak, and others?

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