This far by faith: The power of the black church

Cover Story in the May 31, 2003 issue

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What led you to write *This Far by Faith?*

I am an immigrant to the U.S. I was born in Panama and my mother brought me and my sister and brother to Brooklyn in 1958 when I was four years old. So the black experience in this country was new to me as a child. I started exploring the neighborhood, meeting new people—it all had a sense of wonder for me.

One of the first things I remember noticing was the power and diversity of the church. Even as a boy I was puzzled by the intensity of religion among the black people around me.

In Brooklyn you could go to the street corner and there would be a Black Muslim guy selling newspapers and telling you that you have to straighten up, do away with the religion of the slave master, be a strong man, be yourself, understand your roots. And you could see farther down the street a Catholic church with kids going to Catholic school, many of whom were my friends, and they were very studiously involved with the Latin mass and the rosary. There weren't many black priests, but people found sustenance and a home in the Catholic church.

Of course, there was the Baptist church. It seemed like everybody from the Baptist church came from the South. There was a real geographical connection there. You

could get good inexpensive food at the Baptist church—southern cooking on Saturday and Sunday. They would feed the kids for free. There also was the African Methodist Episcopal church with its grand traditions and sense of dignity and history.

And then there was my Episcopal church. My father, who is from Jamaica, was Anglican, and that church was extraordinarily supportive of my family, helped my sister and brother in everything from clothes to spending money as they went off to college. A lot of immigrants from the Caribbean attended that church for the same reasons my family did—it was their anchor in a new land.

The black church in all this variety seemed omnipresent in my corner of Brooklyn. There was a powerful faith in action that you couldn't avoid. People were going to church not only on Sunday but also on Tuesday and Wednesday nights for some auxiliary board meeting, women's meeting or youth group. The black community was defined at the center by the black churches. At the heart, *This Far by Faith* is an attempt to understand that childhood immigrant experience of marvel at the church's powerful position in the black community.

Your book goes beyond sociological description to state openly that the story about the struggle for justice and freedom in black America is also the story of faith.

I started out with sociological questions that emerged out of that childhood puzzlement about all that religion. But as I researched this book and wrote and rewrote it, it became clear to me that that there is a direction connection between faith and the struggle for civil rights. This is true not only in the period of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, but in every historical period, beginning with the colonial era. In the book I pick up the story in the early 1800s in Charleston, South Carolina, where a charismatic black church leader, Denmark Vesey, organized an aborted uprising against slavery and was executed. You can see the faith connection in the Reconstruction period when blacks were struggling to create a separate black church as a basis for black leadership in the country.

There's no question, of course, about where the leadership of the civil rights movement was nurtured. In the church. Civil rights leaders were church leaders, and the movement grew out of the church. Without the church that movement would have been absent leadership and, maybe even more critically, absent the notion of Christian conscience that blacks could appeal to: "If we are both Christians, how can

you not view me also as a child of God?" That's the power of Martin Luther King's message.

When I was younger I thought that the church was mostly about class and economics. People at the lower end of the economic scale needed the comfort of the church. As I've grown older I've come to understand the centrality of religious experience for black people as an armament against—I don't want to be too dramatic—the assaults of the broader society and as a wellspring of resolve to fight for your rights. If the broader society was saying to you that because of the color of your skin we don't think you're smart, we don't think you're capable of holding anything but a menial job, the church was offering the contrary and subversive message to black people that, whatever anyone else might say, God is with me. God believes in me. God loves me. I am God's child.

Of all the stories you tell in this book, did any one particularly grab your attention?

I'd say the story of Noble Drew Ali, who was born Timothy Drew. Born in 1886, a child of former slaves, Drew traveled north in 1913 to Newark, New Jersey, and reinvented himself. In the process he helped reinvent other struggling itinerant southern blacks who were looking for hope in the promised land of the north. He reinvented them not as wandering ex-slaves, but as African royalty, people who have had their true identity hidden from them by the white man. He taught them that they came to the U.S. from Morocco and were tied to a line of leadership and royalty. He told them to give up their slave masters' names, to do away with names like Smith and Thomas and Jones and become Ali or Bey, and wear turbans and distinct clothes to signal their true identity.

What fascinated me was tracing the lines of influence that seem to extend from Ali to Marcus Garvey's African Orthodox Church, which also talked about the pan-Africanist identities and moving away from the slave experience, then to W. D. Fahrd, Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, and then Malcolm X. There's a trajectory of African-American religious experience that includes these leaders. These are people who may have felt rejected by the Christian church, both black and white, or who saw the church as conforming to a society that rejected black people. These marginalized people were looking for an alternative experience, an alternative identity to the one that Christian America offered them. They found it in what was sold to them as Africa-based religious experience.

The themes of separation and integration run through this book, as they do through the history of African-American life. A figure like Garvey represents the separationist side, while King pressed for integration. Where are we now, in your estimation? What is the relationship, for example, between Afrocentrism and the goal of integration?

The consequences of separation are indeed central to the book, as they are to the entire black experience from the days of the American revolution. The black Baptist movement got its start in the 18th century when people like George Liele and David George, former slaves and self-educated ministers, worked to separate out and create their own church. They died in the process. Then you move to the notion of black people having their own view of God, their own religious traditions. That includes the struggle over what I call the business of religion—who prints the church bulletin, who delivers the word, who publishes Sunday school material. I think that many of the high-profile struggles within black churches, whatever the visible point of debate, have been about what happens to the black church if it joins and integrates with the white churches and broader society. Many black leaders have felt that integration would do away with the black church. That would mean that the authority and power exercised by blacks would be diluted and minimized. Those issues remain powerful.

Even within black denominations, there's a lack of coordination and cooperation that comes from this fear of losing power and authority, in part because power and authority are in short supply in black America. If you have some, you hold onto it; maybe you hold on to it till the grave. That's not a healthy situation. But it's the reality.

So separationist tendencies are not simply a matter of black and white, but can be found within the black church as well?

Yes. First and foremost, black Christians separated from white Christians as a response to segregation. Having to sit in the balcony, in the back or outside the door is the root story of the black church in America. The black Christian church has been formed in reaction to the segregationist policies of the white church in America.

But then you also have a separation that occurs within the black church according to who is educated, who is able to read, who gets to read the Bible, and therefore who gets to interpret the Bible. There is a separation according to who goes to school

and who has good jobs. There are a lot of social levels and attachments within the black church and always have been.

In a way, that kind of separation within the black church is involved with the genesis of the Nobel Drew Alis and the W. D. Fahrds, because when they came north, they did not find a lot of acceptance. Obviously the white church was not opening its arms to welcome them, but neither were established black northern congregations which were struggling to become mainstream. They were worried that their country cousins might interfere with the agenda. The northern churches were working hard to break the image of being an ill-educated, illiterate slave church. It's not hard to understand why people who felt rejected by those churches went off to form their religious identity elsewhere.

What about the goal of integration now?

The goal remains, but it can get lost in worries over turf and power, and the continued high level of racial segregation and inequality in American society. In the context of those persistent problems many black people reflexively say, "We don't need to be rejected once more. Why are we busing our children so much? Why are we so concerned? Let's keep black dollars in the black community. Let's subscribe to black services, strengthen our own institutions and stand as equals."

I understand those views even if I think that they're eventually self-defeating. Minority populations in the U.S. now constitute about a third of the population and are still growing. And half of that minority population is made up of young people. But even with the demographic shift, political power and wealth reside in the white community. If you want to fully share in this country, you have to pursue an integrationist agenda or the division of power will remain severely skewed. The integrationist agenda is about achieving justice. It's not about selling out or exacting retribution. African-Americans should have the confidence to sit at America's tables as equals—as citizens without regard to race. They can say in all honesty, "Listen, we have been instrumental in generating the wealth of this country. We are equal citizens and have equal political rights and a voice in this country. We're not going to surrender it by not voting or not raising our hand to speak about key social-policy issues or key foreign-policy issues. We're not going to be minimized."

The integrationist agenda shouldn't be dismissed as old hat, old school or silly idealism. Integration is essential if African-Americans are going to have a hand at

the lever of power in American society. King recognized that, and recognized that anyone whose conscience has been formed by Christianity must see the truth of the integrationist agenda.

Is Afrocentric identity, which is stressed in some black churches, consistent with the integrationist agenda that you're describing?

Identity issues are central to the African-American experience, whether you're talking about Isabella becoming Sojourner Truth or about Timothy Drew becoming Nobel Drew Ali. Today more and more black people are saying that their identity is not going to be that of some bug-eyed comic or gangster rapper that white America likes to gawk at. So who am I? What is my identity and what is my relationship to God and to my faith and my true purpose in life? Those questions are essential to black identity, especially when the dominant culture sends such strong messages about who you are. The attempt to develop a positive basis for black identity in America—an identity that is not driven by historical deformations—is completely understandable.

Where I see myself departing from the aims of Afrocentric identity, in the churches or elsewhere, is when the attempt to form identity becomes simply a reactionary impulse—and often an angry one—to white America. It is simplistic to present black identity as a contradictive stand to whatever white people say is reality. If white people support the war, then we oppose the war. If white people are pro-Bush, then we're anti-Bush. If white people are supporting X, we support Y. Mere contradiction becomes black identity.

You're giving a whole lot of power to white people if you define yourself as the opposite of whatever they assert. You're not opening doors to who you are in terms of a broader culture and broader society; you're narrowing who you are. You become simply a representation of the white person's shadow. On a personal basis I would find that offensive because it would limit me.

But there's still so much anger among African-Americans about what is perceived as the failure of the integrationist experiment that the market is huge for identity politics. Since 1954 and the *Brown v*. *Board of Education* decision there have been improvements in black life, but no one can kid himself about the inequities that still exist.

Are we correct in detecting a touch of sadness at the end of your book—sadness that the energy and power the black church exerted at the height of the civil rights movement has diminished?

What probably comes through most at the end of the book is a sense of the loss of focus. Beginning in slave days the church focused on the idea of supporting and educating black people and advocating equality. But there was always the deeper purpose that flows out of the common cup that says: here is a vision for God's purpose for us as a people. In too many churches, that's gone.

Much of what I see happening in African-American religious life today is self-indulgent. The gospel of prosperity that's preached in many African-American churches is not about sacrifice for the greater good of the African-American community. And it's not about any example of sacrifice that arises from the example of Christ. It's a get-rich theology. That's tragic when you think of all the African-Americans who suffered tremendously and sacrificed their lives for the greater good of black Americans.

A consequence of the church's lack of focus is the absence of young people. Black middle-class kids aren't interested in the church for a lot of the same reasons that white middle-class kids aren't interested. They don't see the church as relevant today. They don't see the church undertaking high-risk challenges. I don't think young people see discipline and self-sacrifice in mainstream black churches anymore. It's telling that the fastest-growing faiths tend to be Pentecostal fundamentalist groups that offer very clear lines of instruction.

But if the mainstream black churches were true to their heritage, they would stand up and take risks by speaking out against schools of poor quality even though some people in the pews may be running those schools or teaching in them. They should have the courage to say that we have homosexuals in our congregation, that we know people here have sex outside of marriage, and that we are concerned about our members, including heterosexual women, becoming infected with AIDS. And we're worried that so many of us have such stressful lives that we do drugs. This truth is not heard in many black churches.

When young people see that kind of timidity concerning social issues, combined with an obvious concern about money, or growing the congregation or developing mega-churches, they become cynical about the church. If the only identity young people

can take from church is another version of the culture of materialism, then I hope they stay cynical. That's not where a sense of community comes from. That's not where I get my sense of purpose for life. The church should be a witness to Christ's example. Social timidity and an obsession with money do not reflect Christ's example.

It's unusual to hear such explicit criticism of the black church. The code of silence about any problems in the black church seems strong among both whites and African-Americans.

Is it ever! There is a strong silence about black politics too. When I was battling Marion Berry during the time he was mayor of Washington, D.C., people would say, "Oh, you know, he's a brother. Why are you putting him down and why are you writing about him in the *Washington Post*? That's a white man's newspaper." Meanwhile there's no accountability for him as a leader in the black community, though the consequences of his policy decisions, budget decisions and private behavior were devastating to the community. So even when I was simply saying that I want to talk about Berry's record, the fire was on me, not on him.

The same is true in the religious arena. Some people might say that I'm undermining black leaders by speaking so openly. But when you have a Henry Lyons, the consequence of silence about his poor leadership is devastating for people who can't afford poor leadership. No code of silence should be allowed to cover up a lack of accountability. African-Americans need healthy, spirited, open debate.

Why can't the black church speak openly about AIDS, which is now the leading cause of death among African-American males between the ages of 20 and 40?

Shame is a significant factor. Over a long period of time the church has been socialized to deny homosexuality. "Not in our church." And that denial extends to people with AIDS or who are HIV-positive. "That's somebody else's church." Even if you think homosexuality is sinful, we should at least talk about it.

What do you hope your work on *This Far by Faith*—both the book and the television series—will achieve?

My hope is that the riches of black Christian experience will not be squandered. I hope subsequent generations will tap into this rich identity to say, "Here is where I belong, and this is who I am." I hope that the stories I tell show that being African-

American is not simply about being a counterculture, or having a counterexperience to white people. African-American religious experience offers us a strong unifying vision that has been the basis for the freedom struggle, for political organizing, for resilient personal identity and for education. It has given our lives meaning and helped create an American community of greater equality, purpose and opportunity. I hope the book, in a small way, helps the black church claim its proud heritage and put that wealth of experience to good purpose within the black community and the broader society.