

EDITORIAL

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perspectives

African American Spirituality: A Universal Inheritance

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

Two recent headlines for major news articles by New York Times columnists seem at first blush to reach to the heart of modern man's spiritual dilemma. Within a week we had, "Baby Boomers, Now Parents, Turn To Church", and "New Age Spirit Quest Leaves Indians Decrying Cultural Theft".

Just what is it that is driving this frantic search for answers to a world wide phenomenon of disillusionment and uncertainty? Is this a new crisis of beliefs, religion -- about one's place in the universe, in the scheme of things? And, more importantly, why now? Has the failure of institutions, long trusted and revered, long depended upon for balance and support in an otherwise uncertain world brought our fear and trepidation to a critical mass? In these frantic (be-lated) searches for answers some even wonder if it is safe to look too deeply within. The human psyche suddenly seems too fragile, too vulnerable as senseless violence reaches crescendo in the nation, throughout the world, in fact: not just among strangers but neighbor against neighbor, children against parents and other children, class against class, and even the peace makers quarrel bitterly. It seems that a terrible sense of "alienation" has gripped mankind, transcending race, consequent and geography. Nightly, blood drips from television set.

Webster's dictionary describes "alienation": "A withdrawal or separation of a person or his affections

from the values of one's society or family -- from a position of former attachment." Others, like the academic spokespersons for those "baby boomers" (born soon after World War II), describe the current era as one of "enormous fragmentation of the spirit" with parents expressing concern about the moral and religious socialization of their children. Well and good from the pundits and social arbiters for the articulate middle class, but how is it with the ethnic and economic minorities? The Blacks, the Indians, the poor.

That New York Times article about the "New Age" spiritual quest of middle class whites (Oregonian, 12/27/93) was merciless in its indictment of a blatant "mockery" of the original American's reverence for the nature of the world. "Wisps of smoke rose from burning herbs... a prayer to mother earth and father sky... a song about the return of the bison and reverent words offered for the 'red nation'... All that was missing among the forty was an 'Indian'".

The kind of activities bring on comments like those of John Lavelle, a Sioux who is director of the Center for Support and Protection of Indian Religions and Indigenous Traditions: "This is the final phase of genocide. First whites took the land and all that was physical. Now they are going after what is intangible". Speaking of the "intangible", how much of the residual rights in the block buster movie "Geronimo" will find its way to Indian institutions? Not much if

any, considering the mounting envy and jealousy over Indian Casino operations (and Salmon fishing). Some say small compensation for the trillions in land and resources taken. And lives?

But, wait a minute now. What about this African American spirituality that springs forth from an African tradition that was recorded many thousands of years ago when the rest of the world was in a barbaric stupor. Can today's blacks reassert a moral authority and tradition that is documented in the Bible and other religious writings--in Greek and Roman history, on Egyptian papyri and pyramids, on Ethiopian papyrus and Nubian Temples? Can they reinstitute the soul-sustaining reverence for God and man they brought with them as slaves in an alien land?

This is the moral imperative which enabled blacks to not only maintain sanity and a sense of self, but to move forward and build those institutions, spiritual and secular, that have sustained them to date. It is now, in this universal crisis of spirit and soul, that we must wonder if that millennium-old consciousness of the order of things which brought the rest of the world out of spiritual darkness, can again bring the light. Especially when the very African American youth is in violent and destructive ferment.

Next week: how we did it before and how we must do it again if we are to survive. Our spiritual inheritance from day 1 in Ethiopia.

New Year's Resolution

Whereas, The President has yet to appoint an Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Civil Rights, whose duties would include enforcing the provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act; and

Whereas, the rights of those citizens who are protected by the Voting Rights Act are now more vulnerable than any other time in this decade; and

Whereas, for the disenfranchised, the 1965 Voting Rights Act is the most important piece of social legislation of this century; and

Whereas, the Supreme Court in the case of Shaw v. Reno, ruled that irregularly shaped minority districts are subject to Constitutional challenge and therefore threatens to undermine the 1965 Voting Rights Act; and

Whereas, our President, in his advocacy for color-blind constituencies, recently stated, "too many of us are still too unwilling to vote for people who are different than we are;" and

Whereas, the U.S. Congress is currently considering legislation that would seek to use the interpretation in Shaw as a basis for challenging minority districts in court at the federal,

state and local level, thereby threatening the hard-won gains in minority representation made because of the 1965 Voting Rights Act; and

Whereas, HR-2862, which has 98 co-sponsors and is currently pending before Congress, threatens to codify the Shaw decision which would be a major setback to equal voting rights and representation in this country; and

Whereas, even with the 1965 Voting Rights Act, African Americans and other minorities continue to face barriers in achieving a fair share of political power nationwide as evidenced by the fact that there are nearly 500,000 publicly elected or appointed officials in our country, yet African Americans, who represent 12.8 percent of the total population and would hold approximately 60,000 of those offices, hold only 7,500 or a mere 1.5 percent of those offices; and

Whereas, this is the only court case in which the Supreme Court has created a remedy without a violation -- i.e., a showing that anyone's rights have been violated; and

Whereas, the implications of Shaw for reducing the mere 1.5 percent of African Americans who hold political office in our country is a

major threat to Black social, educational and economic progress at many levels and areas beyond the political arena; and

Whereas, these attacks on the 1965 Voting Rights Act by the Congress and the Courts will potentially instill a chilling effect on the willingness of state legislative redistricting bodies to draw electoral districts with the aim of remedying the past effects of voter discrimination;

Now, therefore, Be It Resolved that (Your Organization) go on record as seeing the Shaw decision as the greatest threat in our day to equal representation for people of color at the federal, state and local level; and Be It Further Resolved that (Your Organization) urge Democrats in Congress to unanimously oppose HR-2862.

Be It Further Resolved that (Your Organization) urge the President of the United States to appoint an Asst. Atty. Gen. for Civil Rights who has a track record consistent with the Intent of the 1965 V.R. Act.

Respectfully submitted to,
The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Celebrate Diversity

Most Insured Americans Will Get Better Health Benefits

Most Americans who now have health insurance will get better benefits under the Clinton Health Reform, according to a report released today by the consumer group Families USA.

"Insured Americans are BIG Winners under the Clinton Reform," said Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA.

"Most Americans with private insurance will get better benefits and more security under President Clinton's Health Reform," Pollack said.

The new report looks at the number of insured Americans in every state to get improved coverage in five benefit areas under the Clinton Reform--prescription drugs, long term care, vision services, dental care, and mental illness or substance abuse treatment. The report also calculates the number of insured Americans who will pay less in deductibles and copayments, and the number of insured Americans who will get strong new protection against insurance company discrimination.

The report finds that 53 million insured Americans will gain new or improved coverage for prescription drugs by 1998, 121 million currently insured Americans will gain dental benefits by 2001, 139 million will gain new vision protection by 1998,

153 million will gain improved benefits for mental illness and substance abuse by 2001, 2.6 million will be eligible to receive new long term care service at home by 2003, 37 million will pay lower amounts in deductibles and copayments in 2001, and 31 million will gain protection against insurance company discrimination by 1998.

The Families USA report does not count those on Medicaid or the uninsured, most of whom will also benefit.

Four out of five elderly use prescription drugs, yet fewer than half have private insurance coverage for drugs. Medicare does not now cover prescription drugs. Under the Clinton Reform, 22 million older Americans will gain new coverage for prescription drugs under an expanded Medicare by 1998, according to the report.

"Under the President's Reform, our grandparents will no longer have to choose between buying groceries and buying their medicine," Pollack said.

The prescription drug benefit will also help 32 million Americans under age 65.

The greatest numbers of Americans of all ages will gain new or improved drug coverage under the Reform in California (5.6 million), New York (3.9 million), Texas (3.1

million), Florida (3.1 million), Pennsylvania (3 million), Illinois (2.5 million), Ohio (2.3 million), New Jersey (1.8 million), Michigan (1.8 million), and North Carolina (1.4 million).

The insurance most Americans have today does not cover dental care. Under the Clinton Reform, 121 million privately insured Americans will gain dental benefits by 2001, according to the study. Of those, 87 million will be adults and 34 million will be under 18.

The greatest numbers of privately insured Americans will gain dental benefits by 2001 in California (12.3 million), Texas (8.4 million), New York (8.3 million), Florida (6 million), Pennsylvania (5.9 million), Illinois (5.8 million), Ohio (5.5 million), Michigan (4.7 million), New Jersey (3.9 million), and Virginia (3.5 million).

Most insured Americans now have policies that exclude vision coverage. American consumers pay for the vast majority of vision products and services out-of-pocket. Under the Clinton Reform, 139 million privately insured Americans will gain new vision protection by 1998, according to the report.

The greatest numbers of privately insured Americans will gain vision benefits in California (14.2 million), Texas (9.9 million), New York (9.1

million), Florida (7 million), Illinois (6.7 million), Pennsylvania (6.6 million), Ohio (6.4 million), Michigan (5.4 million), New Jersey (4.3 million), and Virginia (4 million).

Americans whose insurance policies include some mental illness or substance abuse benefits today often have very limited coverage. Under the Clinton Reform, 153 million Americans will gain improved benefits for mental illness and substance abuse by 2001, according to Families USA's report.

These states have the highest numbers of insured who will gain improved coverage for mental illness or substance abuse in 2001: California (16.3 million); New York (11.1 million); Texas (9.4 million); Pennsylvania (8.2 million); Illinois (7.7 million); Ohio (7.6 million); Michigan (6.2 million); New Jersey (5.4 million); and North Carolina (4 million).

Nearly every American family eventually faces a long term care crisis. Very few Americans can afford insurance to protect them from the bankrupting costs of long term care. Under the Clinton Reform, all Americans with severe disabilities will be eligible to receive new long term care services at home. It is estimated that 2.6 million Americans will actually get this care in 2003.

The greatest numbers of Americans will get long term care at home under this new coverage in 2003 in California (274,000), Florida (184,000), Texas (174,000), Illinois (115,000), Michigan (78,000), New Jersey (76,000), and North Carolina (74,000).

Millions of Americans pay high deductibles and copayments today. About 25 million Americans had health expenses that amounted to ten percent or more of their income in 1993.

Under President Clinton's Reform, nearly 40 million insured American will have lower deductibles and copayments by 1998.

The greatest numbers of Americans will have lower copayments and deductibles in 1998 in California (5.7 million), Texas (3.4 million), New York (2.7 million), Florida (1.9 million), Illinois (1.4 million), Pennsylvania (1.4 million), and New Jersey (962,000).

Today, millions of Americans with health problems face discrimination by insurance companies. Some are denied health coverage for conditions they or their family members already have, or are charged higher premiums. By 1998, under the Clinton Reform, 31 million potential victims of insurance company discrimination will gain new protection, as the dis-

criminatory practices are outlawed, according to the report.

The greatest numbers of people will benefit from these insurance reforms in California (3.5 million); Texas (2.2 million); New York (2.1 million); Pennsylvania (1.5 million); Florida (1.5 million); Illinois (1.5 million); Ohio (1.4 million); Michigan (1.1 million); New Jersey (1 million), and Georgia (845,000).

"Insurance companies won't be able to discriminate against Americans who are old or sick or have sick children under the President's Health Reform. Such insurance companies practices will simply be banned," Pollack said.

The estimates in the report are based on several government data sources: the National Medical Expenditure Survey, the Survey of Income and Program Participation and the Current Population Survey. The data in the report was calculated by Families USA with the assistance of Lewin-VHI, a technical health care consulting firm.

The new report, "Better Benefits: Millions Helped by Clinton Reform," was produced by Families USA Foundation.

Families USA is the national consumer group fighting for health and long term care reform.

THIS WAY FOR BLACK EMPOWERMENT Minister Farrakhan And Black-On-Black Violence

On Saturday, December 17, I had the privilege of addressing Minister Louis Farrakhan's "Stop the Killing" rally at the Jacob Javits Convention Center in New York City. I was particularly honored to welcome the minister to New York and deliver the first speech of the rally.

Minister Farrakhan's appearance before a crowd of 25,000 African American New Yorkers was an extremely important event, not simply because it was the minister's first public appearance in New York City since 1985, but also because it came at a time when the Black community of the city--and the nation--finds itself in a leadership crisis.

In the wake of Mayor David Dinkins' defeat, Black politicians are circling like vultures. They're running every which way (mostly to the right) in an attempt to make themselves acceptable to the white power

structure. That's why the arrival of Minister Farrakhan--a man of principle who puts the needs of the community before political ambition--was so welcome.

We're all aware of the epidemic of violence, crime and drug abuse that is destroying the very social fabric of our communities. Some of our political leaders are responding to this crisis by blaming our young people. The Reverend Jesse Jackson, for example, has been touring New York schools and churches calling on our children to turn their friends and peers in to the police.

But as I put it at the rally, "The Black community has to concern itself less with who it turns in and concern itself more with who it turns out. We've got to turn out those who thrive on violence, we've got to turn out those who benefit from the kill-

ing. We've got to turn out those who manipulate our fears for their own political gain."

"There are wealthy power brokers in this country who are making millions off of our kids doing crack. There are corrupt police officers living in style by confiscating and reselling guns and drugs while our kids go to jail and the politicians turn their heads. And there are Black leaders who maintain their positions of power in the Democratic party by exploiting our despair and our powerlessness while they bow down to the Zionist elements who maintain undue influence in this city and the corporate elements who dominate this country."

Dissing our children may win you a Democratic party nomination, but it plays right into the hands of the white racists. As the Minister put it at the rally: "You

say this is a tough generation. We produced it. Don't check the fruit. Let's check the tree."

Our Black misleaders--in New York and nationally--are doing virtually nothing to help our people overcome the poverty, racism and hopelessness which produces self-destructive violence and drug abuse. Instead they're busy trying to figure out how to broker our misery into getting elected mayor or senator or governor or whatever. If the African American community is serious about doing something to stop the violence, we're going to have to make some tough decisions.

"The issue," I told the crowd at the Javits Center, "is whether you will have the courage and the intelligence to stand up on behalf of our people to turn out the Judases amongst us and to stand up with the Black leader who strive to be independent of the corrup-

tion, independent of the manipulation, leaders such as Minister Louis Farrakhan, Reverend Al Sharpton and myself."

Minister Farrakhan and I don't see eye to eye on everything, but we agree that there are solutions to the violence that plagues our communities. The Nation of Islam had demonstrated the success of some of its solution to fighting drug dealing and drug abuse. Activists and leaders who work with me have created program after program--including the All Stars Talent Show Network, the Barbara Taylor School, Pregnant Productions--which provide non-violent environments where our young people can grow and develop in positive directions.

These solutions have been denied and in many cases attacked because the leaders who have generated them--Minister Farrakhan and my-

self--are independent. But that, of course, is exactly why they work. Minister Farrakhan and I can see and implement solutions to violence and crime precisely because we're independent, politically and financially, of the Democratic and Republican Parties. Those who control the two old parties aren't interested in a solution; they would just as soon see us kill ourselves off. All they're concerned about is keeping a lid on the Black community, which means making sure we don't shake things up too much.

The question facing the Black community is: are we going to follow the independent road which will take us to the end of violence or will we once again settle for a Democratic or Republican Party-controlled approach that is more about power and privilege for the few than dealing with violence in our communities?