

Songs of Zion: Eschaton and Blues in African-American Faith

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“The blues are a major portion of our great secular music tradition, ‘the devil’s music,’ as black folk used to call it, in their grand Manichaean, not Christian, understanding of the world.” So claims Gerald Early in an article on blues in a recent issue of *Books & Culture* (Early 1999).

Early locates them originally in “working-class” black America. As nostalgic bourgeois whites have taken over the genre in their endless search for cultural authenticity (I suppose I should say “*our* endless search”), the original blues people have abandoned their own form, only to find that it clings to them with a greater tenacity than they had expected. Ashamed at his own shame, Early shows us (and himself) the blues as fruit of the process by which Africans learned to be Americans – “or to be not quite” Americans. They are to black politics what spirituals are to black faith.

This places them on another plane altogether, out of the reach of their Christian critics. “The blues never challenge standard Christian ethics, and never try to negate them. In fact, blues, despite what church black folk said decades ago, seem to complement the Christian life as they express, from their thick ribaldry to their astringent theme of the existential difference or the caprice of justice, the only mature form of secular heroism we possess.”

Like all of my sources, Early has forgotten more about the blues than I will ever know. He knows African-American traditions inside and out, while I am just an outsider looking in. But his claims still leave me nervous. Are blues really an unthreatening secular counterpart to spirituals? Are they a heroic complement to Christian spirituality? Are they “basically optimistic”? Are they Manichaean? And how can they be all these things at once?

My presentation asks a different question: What role does – or might – the practice of blues serve in proper Christian faith? My answer travels through a critique of four accounts of the blues. Early’s analysis appropriates and affirms all four. First, Early himself claims blues are Manichaean. Second, Larry Neal claims blues are “metaphysically” anti-Christian (Neal in Spencer 1992, 38). Third, LeRoi Jones treats blues as secular (Jones 1963). Fourth, James Cone and Jon Michael Spencer maintain that blues express an authentic Christian spirituality (Cone

1991). I believe these accounts correct each other – but only once they all respect the eschatological tension between the old world that groans the blues, and the new, *spiritual* creation that has already and not yet arrived. The eschatology of African-American Christianity explains the rise of the blues, its antagonism with the black Church, its spiritual segregation under modernity, and its past and future liturgical promise.

I see the blues (and their successors, such as rap) as practices of lament and imprecation that can inhabit and enrich the orthodox Christian faith of black (and non-black) America. These practices respect the theodical nature of black faith (Jones 1987). Yet they are equally appropriate for non-black traditions which *respect* the practice of doubt, such as Lutheranism, and for traditions that need to *rediscover* that respect, like my own white evangelicalism.

Are Blues Manichaean?

James Evans tells us that slaves and their descendants were shorn of their geographic home, their ethnic heritage, and their family relations – “denarrated” by slaveholders. Yet African America retained a deep faith in a powerful, providential creator God that it inherited from African religion. According to William R. Jones, under the stress of the racist gospel of white America, this faith formed black theology in fundamentally theodical categories.

Many theodicies arose. Some blacks lost their faith in God – or at least their interest. “Ethiopic” interpretation found in biblical Egypt, Ethiopia, and Cush a glorious African past with which it conducted a triumphalist culture-war against the white West. Elijah Muhammad turned slaveholders’ pseudoscience on its head, claiming that the original, unfallen humanity was black, and its ethnic destiny was separation from inferior whites. Malcolm X found a new narrative in his own denarration. If Early is right, the blues tradition stakes its claim alongside these others as a Manichaean affirmation of evil’s power. Nevertheless, against all these various visions, much of the black Church has experienced Israel’s call, enslavement, liberation, wandering, conquest, apostasy, exile, return, and future as its own. The God of Moses is God of the disinherited and denarrated.

Against the white supremacist theology that God was a white racist and blacks were children of Ham, the black Church knows God as black, America as Egypt, and exodus as its eschatological destiny.

But an exodus to where? Black Church eschatology still takes a variety of forms. Some have taken Israel as merely an archetype of every oppressed people's story, and called Africa their Promised Land. Others have followed in the footsteps of Europe's Puritan emigrants and hoped that the Promised Land would be (an eschatologically separated) America. For both these schools, Israel's exodus is a timeless manifesto of liberation. Still others have found their biological ancestry in lost, sub-Saharan tribes of Israel, making Israel's exodus a forestate of their own biological inheritance. Finally, the "catholic" black tradition has found incorporation into Christ to be the key to its identity as Israel's liberated children, and the *one* exodus Jesus accomplished at Jerusalem to be the ground of its freedom. Alone among these visions, the last tradition finds its story eschatologically *grafted* into Israel's, rather than merely copied or naturally inherited.

However these different schools understand the destination of the exodus Church, all affirm that Israel's story is the metanarrative of all, including African-Americans, who are narrated by powerful and sinful discourses, denarrated and atomized by modernity, or renarrated by postmodern acts of their own fragmented and misdirected wills.

The black Church's vision of salvation is Augustinian, not Manichaean. To Manichees, Yahweh is a "malevolent demon" and the patriarchs "dirty old men" (Brown 1969, 50). The physical world is not a once and someday good creation, but a realm of darkness in which trapped light awaits escape back to its source. Canaan is no promised land, Israel no chosen people. The incarnation is an alien rescue mission. This is the theological world Early likens to a "fundamentally helpless" strain in black American spirituality that blues exemplify (and spirituals, rhythm and blues, and civil rights reject). By contrast, the black Church celebrates the *restoration* of the world, by the God responsible for *both* creation and redemption, through disciples who are anything but helpless.

Jon Michael Spencer even invokes *City of God* (12.6) in characterizing the blues as an evil turning to the good that is below oneself (Spencer 1990, 118).

Then is the blues tradition a Manichaean theodical challenge to the black Church? The answer lies in the relations between Church musicians and the devil's musicians.

Devil's Music? Blues as Anti-Christian Challenge

According to John Lovell, Jr., the poorest, blackest, most alienated African-Americans stayed away from Christianity both during and after slavery. Like freed prison camp inmates, these eventually abandoned the corn songs of the plantation, but not the epistemological world of the plantation, nor the wholistic African worldview through which they had narrated it (Lovell 1972, 510-511). They shared the vocabulary of black America, but not the grammar of its Christians.

The centrality of the devil in blues respects the centrality of theodicy in black faith, but contradicts the centrality of God in spirituals. To Early, blues proclaim that “we are not the earth’s stewards, nor are we blessed with bounty by virtue of God’s goodness or by virtue of being Americans, nor are we here on this earth for any ultimate end except to die and, most importantly, to love, where and when we can, with whomever is available.”

Early calls blues contrary to “Puritan, Catholic, and hedonistic ethics,” but elsewhere maintains that blues ethics do not challenge “Christian ethics.” If this is not a challenge to Christian ethics, what is?

The common theodical ground under blues and spirituals only intensifies their conflict (Spencer in Spencer 1992, 120ff). “You can only sing one and not the other,” says Robert Wilkins, blues singer turned preacher. “Only one at a time that man can serve. ... See, your body is the temple of the spirit of God, and ain’t but one spirit can dwell in that body at a time. That is the good spirit or the evil spirit. And that’s spirituals or the blues. Blues are songs of the evil spirit” (Gruver in Spencer 1992, 22).

Many bluesmen came out of the Church (Neal in Spencer 1992, 37). To change genres was to convert: One abandoned the Church by selling oneself at the crossroads, or returned like Wilkins as a prodigal (where one was not always welcomed by self-righteous siblings) (Spencer 1992, 119-131).

Yet rare figures could translate between these two camps. Some Christians indulged in “tipping off” to the blues lifestyle (Spencer 1990, 118-119). But these might just be weak, or hypocrites, or shallow synchretists. More interesting are the musicians who recorded both blues and spirituals, such as Bessie Smith (Spencer 1992, 122-123). Most interesting of all are those who dared to synthesize them. Dude Botley says about Buddy Bolden,

He’s playing something that, for a while sounds like the blues, then like a hymn. I cannot make out the tune, but after a while I catch on. He is *mixing* up the blues with the hymns. He plays the blues *real* sad and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the blues sadder than the hymn. That is the first time that I had ever heard hymns and blues cooked up together. Strange cold feeling comes over me; *I get sort of scared because I know the Lord don’t like that mixing the Devil’s music with his music.* ... It sounded like a *battle between the Good Lord and the devil*. Something tells me to listen and see who wins. If he stops on the blues, the Devil wins (Neal in Spencer 1992, 37-38, emphasis in original).

At the critical level, Lovell considers blues “a child of the spiritual,” and maintains that some spirituals “have all the fundamental character of blues” (Lovell 1972, 463-464). (In my day, a song that vividly made this point was “When Love Comes to Town” by U2 with B.B. King.)

If the two genres in fact share a common depth grammar, then Larry Neal puts things too strongly when he finds between them “different metaphysical attitudes” (Neal in Spencer 1992, 37). Perhaps the metaphysics *are* shared after all. Then the rivalry between blues communities and Christian communities is a struggle not between Augustinianism and Manichaeism, but between two schools – or even *moods* – of Augustinianism. That would explain both the two camps’ longstanding strife and their strained fellowship.

Secular Spiritual? Blues as a Function of Sociology

That suggestion will have to wait. Neal's claim of metaphysical difference is his rejection of the next major interpretation of this rivalry. It uses class analysis to explain sociologically the two traditions' commonalities, distinctives, and hostilities.

Dena J. Epstein's chronicle of black folk music before the Civil War emphasizes both the *exclusivity* and *vitality* of antebellum secular black music. Slaves did not sing both "corn songs" and religious music (Epstein 1977, 176). The former's importation into the latter, and the transformation of dancing into the ringshout, drove secular music underground (Epstein 1977, 345ff). There secular music could treat topics untouchable in church (*e.g.*, an estimated three-quarters of blues songs are about sexual relationships) (Davis 1995, 19, 92).

The Civil War and emancipation broke the antebellum duopoly between plantation and black Church over the social lives of African America. The secular tradition, which was closer to the lives of blacks, then resurfaced (Jones 1963, 48-49). This was especially true among tenant farmers, migrant laborers, and later urbanized northern workers at the end of the social spectrum opposite black "ministers, storekeepers, and professional men" (Jones 1963, 57, 104-105).

LeRoi Jones (now Imamu Amiri Baraka) describes the rise of black Christianity as a cultural whitening of black America, beginning among house slaves and social climbers. It split black America into frustrated would-be insiders, and alienated and radicalized outsiders. Blues is then a re-Africanization of black music, an early postbellum dropping of white accouterments (including that of Church life) by those blacks who stood farther away than ever from the American mainstream (Jones 1963, 59). Their rejuvenated theodicy is a step in, and a microcosm of, the creation of what he calls "the American Negro. A new race" (Jones 1963, 7-8). The blues are African spirituality's American secularization, spirituals its American Christianization.

But *are* blues really fundamentally secular? Or is Jones narrating them through the hindsight of the more truly secular genres of jazz, R&B, soul, and funk? The devil does business at the crossroads, not Max Weber or Karl Marx. God is “always within earshot of the blues singer’s complaints,” the devil “always busy,” and evil and sin “pervasive” (Spencer 1990, 119-120). Jon Michael Spencer points us to the blues’ own words:

Almost all blues make reference to God by means of such familiar interjections as ‘O Lord,’ ‘Good Lord,’ ‘Lordy, Lordy,’ ‘Lord have mercy,’ ‘the Good Lord above,’ ‘my God,’ ‘God knows,’ ‘for God’s sake,’ ‘so help me God,’ and ‘Great God Almighty.’ The fact that blues was the only nonchurch music to consistently and characteristically petition the Lord did not stop journalists from concluding that such colloquialisms were blasphemously tongue-in-cheek. ... God was the reference source in times of blueness, whether petitioned by the churched in black spirituals or by the unchurched in blue spirituals.

The musicians say so themselves: This is not profane music, but devil’s music – sinners’ music. On what grounds do we dismiss that claim? Having demythologized the ancients, do we now demythologize moderns? The social forces in the rise of blues, from emancipation to Jim Crow to northern migration to the rise of the recording industry, *contextualize* African-American spirituality. They do not cancel it out.

As he writes, Jones is on his way to becoming Amiri Baraka the black nationalist, then Amiri Baraka the Maoist. He will later reject Christianity entirely in favor of a reconstructed African spirituality that worships “the life in us, and science, and knowledge, and transformation of the visible world” (Baraka 1999, 253-254). He will champion the secularity he is already finding in the blues.

Yet a kind of worldliness *is* behind the blues’ challenge to spirituals. Blues sing of “the world” passing away, spirituals of a world coming. The distinction is *finally* neither metaphysical nor sociological, but eschatological. It is time to ask whether the blues are Christian after all.

Blues as Alternative Christian Spirituality

Lately Christian theologians, such as Spencer and James Cone, have grown both kinder to the blues, and harsher to one of their theological ancestors. They trace blues back to the revived

white Puritanism of the Second Great Awakening, which introduced into black America an alien distinction between sacred and secular, imposing the “Puritan ethos on a people whose most elegant traditions were the complete antithesis of it” (Jones 1963, 126). Slave Christianity rapidly became otherworldly, looking forward to a “crossing the Jordan” that could only happen with death’s release (Jones 1963, 40). Turning salvation into escape left the world profane and thinly narrated, and open to thicker counternarratives (Spencer 1992, 42-44).

Great Awakening Christianity compensated for this with moralism (Epstein 1977, 208). Moralism proved as robust in the blues as immorality. “No matter how much blues people were opposed to the hypocrisy and self-righteousness of the churched,” Spencer claims, “they still accepted [their] ethical principles” (Spencer 1990, 123). This allowed them to judge the Church’s hypocrites in songs like “Preacher Blues” and “Church Bell Blues” (Spencer 1990, 115). It also eased conversions (some bluesmen even planned to rejoin the Church after retiring) and authorized a certain amount of clean living in the meantime, such as sabbath-keeping (Spencer 1990, 123-130).

Since African traditions do not respect a dichotomy between sacred and secular, Spencer and Cone see blues as an outlawed but necessary aspect of a healthy spirituality.

Cone tells us that blues and spirituals both respond to suffering within the theodical frame of black epistemology. Spirituals plead for God not to leave them alone in their troubles. “The blues people, however, sing as if God is irrelevant, and their task is to deal with trouble without special reference to Jesus Christ” (Cone 1991, 113). Cone calls this the authentic existence of a community finding transcendence in its historical experiences. Spirituals and blues are “two artistic expressions of the same black experience” (Cone 1991, 130). Both genres represent “one of the great triumphs of the human spirit” (Cone 1991, 130). But (even if postmoderns overlook

his claim that two communities with different narratives share a common experience of the world) do they really express *one* common triumph?

The mood of blues prophecy expresses “powerlessness in the face of trouble.” The resulting despair “is real, not imagined” (Cone 1991, 123). It hopes simply “to catch the train” – to survive and escape the hard times. Cone calls this “a firm hope in the possibility of black people’s survival despite their extreme situation of oppression. That is why blacks also sing, ‘Times is bad, but dey won’t be bad always.’ Why? Because times ‘gotta get better ’cause dey caint get w’us’” (Cone 1991, 124).

But is *hope* the right word here? The claim that things will get better because they can’t get worse is bitter irony, a popular device in blues (Lovell 1972, 191). The theme of escape is itself ironic, for no train escapes the grave that is our final destination (cf. Cone 1991, 126). Singing the blues *can* be uplifting – as confronting existential despair can be uplifting. But that is not what Christians (or even Manichaeans!) mean by the word “hope.” To call it hope says too much of those afflicted with the blues, or too little of the community of Jesus.

Spencer thinks of bluesmen as missionary priests. Laboring to survive in a hostile philosophical world, they “rebaptized profane space for the sake of the unchurched black community.” Blues clubs offer a “communion of blues confession” by “blues priests” who preach “gospel blues” (Spencer 1990, 113).

One is tempted to say that they are to the black Church what Willow Creek is to white evangelicalism. However, that characterization is unfair to Willow Creek, which after all is still a church. The House of Blues is not a church even when it serves Sunday gospel brunches to yuppies.

The language of priesthood and baptism is on the right track. But into what larger “communion” do bluesmen and churchgoers belong? Does it include the whites, many of them racist, among many early blues audiences? Where is the repentance in blues “confessions”?

Where Jones is liable to oversecularize the blues, Spencer and Cone are liable to oversacralize them. Whatever their roots in work songs and field hollers, the blues flourish in conditions of secular black American modernity. The blues are a folklore (Jones 1963, 105), a creation of the young recording industry (Davis 1995, 7-8), a form of pop (Davis 1995, 68), a form of entertainment (Jones 1963, 105), a casual music (Jones 1963, 67). Similarly, some evangelicals I know seize on every mention of “God” on TV, in the movies, or at music awards as evidence of coming American revival. I see them more as dilutions of the Church’s faith than harbingers of it. Blues follow spirituals, jazz follows blues (Jones 1963, 70), and so on in a long cultural march out of sacred space.

But a march of what, into where? Henry Townsend, whom Cone and Spencer both cite, has the answer. “If I sing the blues and tell the truth, what have I done? What have I committed? I haven’t lied” (Cone 1991, 106 and Spencer 1990, 123). The blues are truth-telling in the black prophetic tradition (Spencer 1990, 121-124). They are not so much baptism and communion as they are preaching, testifying, witnessing. Whereas the sacraments are rites of a fully formed community that already belongs to the eschaton, the Word abroad in the world is a missionary into the present age. Here it travels in a form problematic to the community of faith, yet it defends itself to that community as a witness to the truth.

Spencer and Cone rightly seek to recover the positive theological significance of the blues tradition. However, such projects run the risk of making churches into glorified blues clubs, or blues clubs into shadow churches. Both communities, and even the bilinguals who associate themselves with both, have historically sensed a profounder tension between these two. They inhabit different worlds – or one world in different ages.

Nevertheless, these projects bring us close to the answer to our original question: Where might blues fit in the worship life of healthy black and non-black churches? Israel canonized the warm wisdom of Proverbs, the cool wisdom of Ecclesiastes, the cold comfort of Job, and a Psalter full of imprecations and songs of lament into a body of writings that stands in rich contrast to the promises of its law and prophets. These too were prophecies of a sort, paying earnest respect to the depth of the world's sin, sometimes even in the enemy's tongue, so that the depth of God's grace might be better known.

Singing the Blues in Post-Puritan America

As the prodigal brother of spirituals, the blues are fathered by the same forces. Both traditions are born of white oppression and domestic dysfunction. Both are framed by African holism and black theodicy's urgent question of "whether God is a white racist." Both draw on the conviction that evil really is *evil*, and that there is no quick fix to African-American troubles. Both answer the call to tell the truth. Yet common forces also distinguish the two.

First, blues are distinct from spirituals by their home in the dreadful "not yet" of plantation life and its work songs, rather than the otherworldly "already" of the black Church's worship gatherings. This eschatological tension is as old as Jewish worship. It inhabits the space between imprecatory psalms and enthronement hymns, between songs of lament and assurances of faithfulness, between holy despair and holy rapture, between the fasting of Jesus' waiting disciples and the feasting that anticipates his return. It haunts times of weeping and times of laughing, mourning and dancing, war and peace. It writes the songs that lurk in captives' hearts when their captors ask for songs from Zion (Ps. 137).

A second force, modernity, traumatizes this eschatological tension by forcing it into the alien categories of sacred and profane. White evangelism to slaves after the Second Great

Awakening grew an anti-worldly black spirituality that left the world to the devil. Secularism came to African America from Enlightenment Christians whose otherworldly agendas dovetailed with the worldly agendas of slaveholders. The remarkable power of blues in what Early calls our “redeemer nation of Puritan origin” is ironic, but logical. Post-Puritan secularism gave blues the philosophical space in which to flourish and challenge its estranged brother.

However, by respecting the modern dichotomy of sacred and profane, blues and spirituals cut themselves off from both the Christian eschatology and the African spirituality that could reconcile them both. They become false opposites that demand we *either* mourn *or* dance. Each trivializes the other eschatological pole of the dialectic that locates the sojourning Church.

Blues life and spiritual life are too incompatible to be reconciled merely by being overlaid. The deeper fellowship of blues and spirituals lies in the holism of premodern, and I hope postmodern, black faith. This holism survives on the margins of both traditions, in the border crossings of Bessie Smith and the perilous synthesizing of Buddy Bolden, in U2’s “Rattle and Hum,” in the Augustinian narrators who fold blues and spirituals into a grander story that does not shrink back from telling either the details of our depravity or the depth of God’s grace.

Protestants have been downplaying the power of evil (and thus good) ever since Lutheran Orthodoxy tamed Luther’s eschatology of conflict between God and the devil. Blues’ apologists and marketers have been as successful as Luther’s modernizers in repackaging its devil-lore as a triumph of the human spirit. Here too, the devil’s preachers proclaim despair as hope and law as gospel, while triumphalists offer the cheap grace of hope without despair and gospel without law.

Luther’s healthier respect for the devil’s work in the end-times, biographically recovered by Heiko Oberman (1992), suggests a constructive frame for the practice of blues. To learn what place the devil’s music has in a life of faith, we should look to Luther, not Mani. The blues are

black *Anfechtungen*. Injustice and law, our unrighteousness and God's "righteousness" all drive us to despair – allowing us to appreciate the grace of Christ as the only authentic ground of hope.

Westmont Blues: Beyond Triumphalism and Despair

The pressure to rush through Good Friday and celebrate Easter early is hard to resist. Realized eschatology's champions usually occupy the moral high ground over the partisans of futurist eschatology. They seem closer to God, holier, less worldly. It is awkward to sing the blues when your neighbor is singing power-gospel.

However, when the futurity of the Kingdom really asserts itself, the tables are turned, and the triumphalists are the embarrassed ones. After the attacks on September 11, the greatest obstacles to mourning on my college campus were our own chapel services. There we were presented with the upbeat choruses that have become our hymnodic canon, and made to sing them as if our pain, shock, terror, and fatigue were unspiritual. My colleague, Jonathan Wilson, had worried weeks earlier that the kind of contemporary worship music he had been hearing in chapel was incapable of expressing grief. September 12 vindicated him in spades. The greatest frustration came from the students, who knew they had been forced too quickly into encouragement. They needed to lament, mourn, and vent. The gospel surrounded them, but they had the blues.

Stories have made the rounds about "terror sex" following the attacks (Kazdin 2001). Singles and couples alike have pursued frantic quests for intimacy, and not only in New York. (I might add that in October my wife and I learned that our fourth child is on its way.) After September 11, the blues' preoccupation with sex makes more sense to me.

In Cone's zeal to affirm the blues, he forgets that the Christian tradition affirms both the goodness of sex before the fall, and the fullness of fellowship apart from marriage. By contrast, sex in the blues strikes an

Augustinian note of life gone wrong, of a fellowship that eludes even when it seems at hand. Yet Cone is still right that the blues are an ache for human (and divine) community (Cone 1991, 117-122).

What my community needed in chapel was a long, mournful, ecstatic communion service, in which we could see, hear, feel, taste, and smell our common participation in Jesus' broken body and shed blood. This would not have been a retreat into the profane, but a memorial of the Christ whose victory we sometimes experience more as a memory and a hope than a reality.

Against the greater backdrop of black and ecumenical Church history and the lesser backdrop of Westmont College after September 11, a truly Christian practice of the blues tradition is *imprecatory* rather than Manichaean, anti-Christian, secular, or redundant. It is a protest lodged before the God the black Church both remembers and awaits as its judge and deliverer. The blues tradition, and rap its successor, need be neither white fashion accessories nor enemies of hopeful black activism. They find their proper place in the greater narrative frame of black, and non-black, Christian worship. We saints have our *Anfechtungen*, even after our baptisms. To ignore them is to turn an opportunity for restoration into a license for apostasy. There is room for blues before Church, and ringshouts afterwards.

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