



Why Many Black Churches Demonize Members of the GLBT Community

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According to the PEW Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, 87 percent of African Americans identify with a religious group and 79 percent say that religion is very important in their lives. The Pew report also showed that since 2008, African American Protestants are less likely than other Protestant groups to believe that LGBTQ people should have equal rights. And since hot-button issues like gay adoption and marriage equality have become more prominent, support for LGBTQ rights among African American Protestants has dipped as low as 40 percent.

A groundbreaking study in July 2010 titled "Black Lesbians Matter" examined the unique experiences, perspectives, and priorities of the Black Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender community. One of the key findings of the survey revealed that there is a pattern of higher suicide rates among black LBTs. Scholars have primarily associated these higher suicide rates with one's inability to deal with "coming out" and the Black church's stance on homosexuality.

Why can't we as an African American community tell the truth about our sexuality? What price do we pay in telling the truth? And what role does the Black church play in perpetuating not only unsafe sexual behavior but also demonizing its members of the LGBTQ community?

Scripture vs. Compassion

One of the ways the black church demonizes its members of the LGBTQ community is its continued use of gay-bashing Scriptures. These Scriptures becomes a controlling device to promulgate moral and political agendas in maintaining conventional and conservative heterosexual gender roles and gender expressions as a prophylactic measure perhaps to combat the epidemic level of fatherlessness in African American households.

The Black Church, however, knows that LGBTQ members are in the church and sends out a mixed message concerning them. For example, the Black church applauds its LGBTQ congregants in the choir pews yet excoriates them from the pulpits. Their connections and contributions to the larger black religious cosmos are desecrated every time homophobic pronouncements go unchecked in these holy places of worship. While the Black Church will argue that it stands on the literal "word of God" and therefore has

justification to erect its homophobic stance based on biblical passages, the church's argument about the "authority of Scripture" doesn't hold weight because historically the Black Church literally discarded all damning and damaging racial references. For example, both the Curse of Ham (Genesis 9:18-27) and Apostle Paul's edict to slaves (Ephesians 6:5-8) served as the scientific and Christian legitimation for the enslavement of people of African ancestry. But the Black Church was wise enough to do the type of exegesis necessary to promote justice, love, and uplift for its people.

Civil Rights: Black vs. Gay

Another reason some black churches demonize members of the LGBTQ community is because they do not understand sexual orientation as a civil rights minority group. Many think the comparison between the struggle for gay rights and black civil rights is at best "a stretch," and at worst, the white LGBTQ community "pimping" the history of black racial suffering to push a homosexual agenda in order to gain "special rights" like, for example, the freedom to marry at the expense of destroying, if not desecrating, the history of the black civil rights movement of the 1960s and derailing continued efforts toward racial equality. Because of the persistent nature of racism in the lives of African Americans and the relatively small gains accomplished supposedly on behalf of racial equality, albeit we now have Barack Obama in the White House, many African Americans, nonetheless, see that civil rights gains have come faster for white LGBTQ middle to upper class Americans in several decades—from the Stonewall Riots of 1969 to the legalization of same-sex marriage in several U.S. states, and now to the recent December 2010 repealing of the military's discriminatory "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy—than it has for them in a lifetime.

The debate, however, between the African American and LGBTQ communities leaves out a population of people who have the most to lose if gay civil rights are ignored—LGBTQ people of African descent!

Church on the "Down Low"

Homophobia in the African American community has become more than merely a spiritual crisis. It is now a public health crisis with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the new face of the epidemic being that of a heterosexual black woman. There are many persistent social and economic factors contributing to the high rates of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the African American community—racism, poverty, health care disparity, violence, to name just a few—but the biggest attitudinal factor still contributing to the epidemic and showing no sign of abating is homophobia. While we know that the epidemic moves along the fault lines of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, and that HIV transmission is tied to specific high-risk behaviors that are not exclusive to any one sexual orientation, the black church's demonization of members of the LGBTQ helps foster a "down low (DL)" culture, especially by "down low" ministers who espouse damning messages about homosexuality.

DL men come from all walks of life. Many African American gay and bisexual men on the DL say there are two salient features that contribute to their subculture: the racism within white gay culture and the homophobia of the Black Church. DL men

deliberately segregate themselves from both black and white gay cultures as an alternative to black masculinity that only wants to have sex and socialize with other black men. The closet these men and ministers find themselves in is emblematic of the Black Church's down low "politic of silence" concerning sexuality. J.L. King, who became the country's poster boy by exposing "down low" behavior in his best-seller, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep with Men*, stated, not surprisingly, that many of his partners were churchmen. "There are gospel conventions throughout the nation for churches. There is one for ushers, Sunday school departments, music departments and ministers. . . . These events allow men to meet men and to have sex while away from their hometowns. Many midnight concerts turn into affairs where brothers are cruising each other. I've been there, seen it, and done it," King states in his book.

Sexuality has never been a comfortable topic of discussion in the African American community. This is largely due to slavery, and then to what we African Americans appropriated from the dominant culture about sexual behavior in order to redeem ourselves as human beings after slavery in the eyes of our oppressors. First bred as cattle during slavery, and later either touted as sex sirens or taunted as sex predators, black sexuality has never had a chance to evolve in a milieu free of abuse, violence, and stereotypes. The raping of black women and the lynching of black men in this country by white men has always kept the control of black bodies away from us. In carving out a racial identity, we African Americans have done it at the expense of leaving our bodies and sexualities behind. With the embrace of fundamentalist Christianity that has embedded in its tenets an asexual theology, African American bodies and sexualities that were once systematically usurped by white slave masters are now ritualistically harnessed by the black church with a "politic of silence," viewed as a revolutionary act against the white oppressive gaze. But what happens in churches, communities, and families where people lose touch with their bodies and sexualities?

Our bodies are our temples, and as our temples they house the most sacred and scariest truth about us: our sexuality. Sexuality is an essential part of being human. It is an expression of who we are; it is a language and a means to communicate our spiritual need for intimate communion—human and divine. However, our silence, shame, and stigma around issues of sexual identity, gender expressions, and sexual practices have allowed for behaviors of denial, neglect, and abuse. And the lack of pastoral care to people deemed "outsiders" is also a factor contributing to high-risk sexual behaviors and the transmission of HIV/AIDS in the African American community.

Right now, the state of black America is in a crisis. And the church institutionally has contributed to the culture of the "politic of silence" because it not only lacks the language to talk about sex but it also sees sex as a private and personal matter and not part of the business of the black Christian community as a way of loving God and ourselves.

But the black church is also uniquely positioned to significantly affect knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors within congregations and by extension the entire African American community. The black church can help its congregants live their sexual lives by devising an African American sex education curriculum where churches embrace the concept that sexuality is God-given, an integral part of being human, and at the core of how we interact with one another. Research has shown that sexuality education programs

in black churches have delayed the onset of sexual activity among teens, reduced the number of partners among teens and adults, and has decreased significantly the incidence of sexually transmitted disease, unplanned pregnancies, and gay-bashing.

Why not consider a sexuality education program for your church? At least begin the dialogue.