

# The Religious Wrong

By Craig Washington

"People want truth or nothing at all. People want sincerity, security and nothing false!" from "What Can I Do For You" as performed by Labelle

When I look back over my childhood, I can truly say that religion was not an integral part of my family "culture." It really was not our way of doing things. In fact, I never attended a regular service until I was 17 years old. I remember neighbors would tease us on those rare occasions when we headed for hallowed ground. "Must be a wedding or a funeral! "Lord, the Washingtons are going to church. I know it's gonna rain!" My parents often joked right back at them. They freely admitted to the absence of that tradition in our home as they were not ashamed about their non-conformist stance.

As a young man, I came to understand that my identity as a same-gender-loving being, that is a non-heterosexual, had placed me as an outsider at the gates of any black church in America. I realized that this identity and the resulting social location necessitated that I take some stance either in opposition or deference to the cultural status quo. It is the wretched choice of the oppressed either to deny your essence in order to be accepted for what you are not, which is to die; or to accept the godforsaken lot they have offered your kind, which is to live a non-life, or to redefine yourself demanding recognition from those who have not a name for what you are, which is to live fully in the bulls eye of fear and ignorance. Perhaps my parent's non-compliance afforded me a critical eye, the wherewithal to interrogate any who dared question my right to be. It was this afforded vision that enabled me to distinguish open spirituality and full inclusion from elitist religiosity and rigid hierarchy. I often wonder if my parents had any inkling that they were raising not only a black homosexual (of this I'm sure there was ample evidence) but also a homosexual activist, that is, one who replies "who are you to ask why am I?"

But before long, you may find me in front of the MARTA 5-points station, clanging a cowbell to herald the apocalypse. I guess I am just a middle-aged black gay man on the verge. A president my country did not elect has wasted millions of dollars

and hundreds of young lives for an unjustified war and still stands a good chance of being legitimately elected for the first time. He has improved his odds by outdoing his father in playing a nation's bigotry, switching mugshots of big black boogeyman like Willie Horton with wedding portraits of battymen and dykes with U-Hauls dragging soda cans. His Georgia cohorts have dutifully followed orders in working the same ruse throughout this ex-Confederate state. Want to wag the dog by keeping questioning citizens of all races off the unmistakable scent of your mendacity? Create a diversionary threat to that which they hold dearest: exclusive privilege. Want to pass budget cuts that rescind healthcare for thousands of women and children in Georgia while no one's looking? Follow the leader. And while you're at it, you can coax black church leadership to hold hands with racist white conservatives at the common grounds of their gay burning bonfire.

Ironies within ironies replicate as majority groups clutch their day pearls at the thought of minorities gaining access to the freedom and power they once had to themselves. The shrill cacophony of homophobic black people and the religious wrong has blended into a harmonious chorus of arrogant indignation. Many heterosexual blacks gag at comparisons between homophobia and racism, and those between civil rights and gay rights as if blacks were the America's only oppressed group who in turn created the only legitimate civil rights movement. Meanwhile the religious right defines the separation of church and state as erasing God from our lives, their God that is, whom they assert is the only God. Trust and believe that these saints are not fighting to have Jewish, Buddhist, or Muslim edicts etched across the walls of government buildings. They are striving for a Christian theocracy in which they can legally subjugate hell bound sinners using the same scripturalism that supported slavery and outlawed interracial marriage.

As "The Passion of the Christ" raises accusations about who killed the incarnate deity, it is the Christian zealots who are obliterating his spirit, by rebuking his principles of agape love which, by the way, doesn't mean love only those who look, prey and screw exactly like you. With all respect to gay and other Christian reformists, I sometimes wonder why they petition the very pastors and popes who have maligned Christianity, those who then blame the damage on the people they cast as abominations? If the majority of churches have become social clubs that are more passionate about rooting out sin than building an inclusive gospel, then why not let them be that? We who wish to really learn how to emulate Christ (or

any other spiritual teacher who showed people how to love) would do better to create our own churches, temples, schools or covens.

Yesterday's civil rights movement drew heavily from a deep well of black theology inspired by the souls of black folk. We knew all too well the dehumanizing effects of discrimination. We knew that despite the overwhelming odds, we were right and God was on our side. And the church provided a home base for that movement. But our challenges have changed dramatically over the past forty years. The class divide between privileged and poor blacks have entangled our communities in the cross wires of complacency and nihilism. As the visionary bell hooks so eloquently signifies, "Many of the material gains generated by militant anti-racist struggle have had little positive impact...for the revolution from within that is the foundation on which we build self-love and love of others has not taken place." We now struggle in absence of a galvanizing love-based movement capable of addressing our needs as blacks in America. Racism is not our only threat yet seems to be the one reliable stimulus to which blacks respond. There are roaring black silences in the face of domestic violence and rape of black women, the erasure of the poor and homeless, the enslavement of black men in the prison-industrial complex and the scorn heaped upon black lgbt people.

When will we raise our standards about the places where we worship and learn, to build this love movement of which hooks speak? Would a rabble rouser like Christ, or any other activist educator support the plethora of black churches that invest in separating so many from the fold? Then why do we? Politicians and media continue to revere the church as the primary site of sociopolitical power in Black America. I believe the church relinquished that role decades ago. Like the Democratic Party they blindly support, far too many black church leaders pander to the lowest common denominator rather than risk taking a stand that may be opposed by the majority in the polls or the pulpits. When we stop begging for acceptance from demagogues who quote scripture out of the context of principle then we change the conversation and unleash our power. As Baldwin prophesied, "Your crown is already bought and pay for. You only have to wear it." There are progressive pastors, Yoruba priests, and leaders of other faiths among us who have transformative messages we need to hear. We who are black and transgendered and bisexual and gay and lesbian have infinite lessons to teach our

people and the rest of the world. Let us utilize the power of our own stories of anguish and triumph. Let us settle for nothing less than what we deserve. Truth.