

## Feminist Sexual Ethics Project

Literature Review by Monique Moultrie

Michael Eric Dyson. "When you Divide Body and Soul Problems Multiply: The Black Church and Sex." In *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*. Ed. Rudolph Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001, 308–326.

*Michael Eric Dyson is the Avalon Foundation Professor in Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania and an ordained Baptist minister.*

In this essay, Dyson offers personal reflections on how the black church deals with sexuality. He begins with an example of a black church worship experience, in which he chronicles the role of a "ministerial Casanova" who preaches the ills of premarital/adulterous relationships and then proceeds to solicit a relationship with one of the congregants. For Dyson, this episode indicates the conflicted theology of sexuality present in black churches and reiterates the necessity for change.

A central thesis for Dyson is that we need to recover erotic uses of black bodies from the "distortions of white racism and the traps of black exploitation" (p. 312). He reviews the historical depictions of black bodies and argues that during and after slavery, blacks resisted negative views of their sexuality. He believes that black women resisted sexual domination by abortion, abstinence, and infanticide, thus interrupting "white pleasure and profit one body at a time" (p. 313). Yet, Dyson argues that a significant mode of resistance came through participation in black religion, despite the fact that these churches often began with a very conservative sexual theology.

The rest of Dyson's article is spent addressing the virtually unchanged conservative sexual theology that does not address the sexual exploitation of black women and children, homosexuality, the rise of AIDS in the black community, or the split between mind and body that leads to confused black Christians. He contends that the black church should build on a celebration of the body and a theology of eroticism and homoeroticism (p. 318, 325). This theology of eroticism/homoeroticism is necessary to free black Christians from sexual repression and effectively address issues like teenage pregnancy, AIDS, and heterosexism. He argues that a pattern for the reunion of the mind-body split is found in black music and that black churches should find in its worship experience a reunion of sexuality and spirituality (p. 317).

In the remainder of the essay, Dyson focuses on remedying the "ecclesiastical apartheid" of the black church, in which the majority of the church is female while the male leadership continues to reinforce the sexual inequality of black women (p. 319). He believes that the leaders of black churches must take the lead in reforming its sexual theology. These new leaders need to promote an honest overhaul of the heterosexist tendencies of congregations and instead to advocate for a legitimization of healthy sexual unions. He closes the essay as he begins, namely with the notion that black churches need

sexual healing and that through this healing it came retain its role as the “balm in Gilead” for black people.

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