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Homosexuality and the Black Community, a Church Minister's Perspective: *Interview with Rev. Irene Monroe*

Anne W. Gathuo, Ph.D.

In this interview, Rev. Irene Monroe points out that the issue of "Black homophobia" is a complicated one that can only be explained by examining racism and all the pertinent economic, social and cultural dynamics that emanate from the discrimination of the Black race in the United States. According to Monroe, the failure of Black communities to embrace their gay and lesbian sons and daughters stems partly from their lack of understanding of the racial dynamics affecting Black Gay and Lesbian people, as well as the rhetoric of the Black Evangelist right which is heavily influenced by White racist thought.

G*athuo: A lot has been said about the Black community and its "aversion" to homosexuality. Is it your sense that Black people in this country are indeed less tolerant of homosexuality than the White people?*

Monroe: The misconception is because the dominant society does not

understand the toll racism takes on the lives of African-Americans, and any epidemic or illness always hit marginalized communities such as the African-American, Latino, and other communities of color hardest. To say that we are more homophobic is a way of excusing the social ills that contribute, if not exacerbate the problem. I just want to make several points here:

First, racism contributes to the high rate of AIDS among young African-American men. For example, while gay healthcare centers open their doors to all gay men, these traditionally White organizations have failed to tailor their messages and outreach services to men of color. And while White gay men may feel the AIDS crisis in the African-American community is solely a Black concern, White gay men must also be reminded that the AIDS crisis in the African-American community is their concern because they too have sex with Black men.

Second, poverty also helps HIV spread throughout the Black community. With the high cost of life-saving drugs, often coupled with the problem of homelessness, mere survival for these young men takes precedence over quality of life. Also, selling their bodies for drugs, a hot meal, temporary lodging or a quick illusion of love lures many young gay Black men to engage in risky and unprotected sex.

Third, Black women are becoming the next largest group with HIV/AIDS. The feminization of this disease makes many of us AIDS and feminist activists wonder if the same amount of monies, concern, communication, and moral outrage that was put into White gay men with the disease will be put into curbing its spread among women. Because of the African-American community's silence and shame about the disease, and its harsher judgment against women with the disease, African-American women are least likely than any other group to seek help; and thus are disproportionately dying in higher numbers with the virus than any other group of women in the U.S.

Fourth, when the color of the epidemic shifted from White to Black the inherent gender bias focused only on the needs of African-American men and rendered White women and all women of color

invisible. And when gender became a new lens to track the epidemic, White women were the focus. The invisibility of African-American women in this epidemic has much to do with how the absence of a gendered race analysis makes African-American women invisible to the larger society. Akasha Gloria Hull, professor of literature and women's studies highlighted the invisibility of African-American women with the title of her seminal text, "All the women are White, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave." According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonprofit health organization, African-American women account for 72 percent of all new HIV cases in women, and they are 23 times more likely to be infected with the virus than White women.

Fifth, the AIDS epidemic among African-American women is also symptomatic of the needed dialogue among us about our bodies and sexuality that has been choked for centuries by a "politics of silence."

Sixth, society cannot see the crisis going on with African-American women around AIDS because the societal stereotypes of us obfuscate our real countenances. The iconography of Black women is predicated on four racist cultural images: the Jezebel, the Sapphire, Aunt Jemima, and Mammy. With the image of the strong Black women who can endure anything and "make a way out of no way," her strength is either demonized as being emasculating of Black men or impervious to the human condition. The Aunt Jemima and Mammy stereotypes are now conflated into what's called "Big Mamma" in today's present iconography of racist and sexist images of African-American women. While the Aunt Jemima and Mammy stereotypes are prevalent images that derive from slavery, they have for centuries been both not threatening, comforting and nurturing to White culture but also to African-American men.

Gathuo: In other words, the issue is too complicated to be explained away by "aversion"... A common reason that is given for the alleged intolerance of homosexuality in the Black community is the role of the Black Church in

actively condemning and preaching against the homosexual lifestyle. Do you agree?

Monroe: First, I want to say that The Black Church colludes with the larger society's discrimination against its African-American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. The Black Church can argue that it stands on the literal word of God and therefore has justification to erect its homophobic stance based on biblical passages. Yet the Black Church literally discards all damning racial references.

The Bible is replete with contradictory and damning messages to all people. Determining which messages are discarded and which are upheld is not a battle about biblical inerrancy or God's will. It is an unmitigated battle of human will.

Is it the will of God to devalue and to dehumanize the lives of women, people of African ancestry, and queers?

For example, there are two creationist myths in the Bible (Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2: 22). The first myth says that God made woman and man simultaneously. The second creation myth is our "rib story" in which Eve is born from a rib of Adam. Undoubtedly this story has ribbed and poked at Christian women throughout the centuries, since it is the authoritative text for substantiating gender inequity in society. The Curse of Ham (Genesis 9:18-27), and Apostle Paul's edict to slaves (Ephesian 6:5-8) served as the scientific and Christian legitimation for the enslavement of people of African ancestry. The Sodom and Gomorrah narrative (Genesis 19: 1-29) is one of the most quoted scriptures to argue for compulsory heterosexuality and queer bashing.

Is it the will of God to devalue and to dehumanize the lives of women, people of African ancestry, and queers? On the question of race, Americans, both Christians and non-Christians, clearly see the answer as no. However, on the question of sexual orientation many of us are religiously challenged.

Second, in carving out an essentialist racial identity, the African-American community and the Black church 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.

Gathuo: People who are against homosexual rights being equated with civil rights give reasons such as: homosexuality is “foreign” to Black culture; homosexuality is a lifestyle choice, race is not; homosexuals are not “oppressed,” Blacks are. What is your opinion on civil rights and gay rights, are they one and the same?

Monroe: Many African-Americans see that civil rights gains have come faster for queer people. From the Stonewall Riots of 1969 to May 17, 2004, the LGBTQ movement has made some tremendous gains into mainstream society, a reality that has not been afforded to African-Americans.

And while the freedom to marry has been an arduous struggle and a right long overdue for LGBTQ people, the debate did not begin with queer people.

The marriage debate here in the U.S. began when African-American slaves were forbidden to marry so they “jumped over the broom,” – an African-American tradition – in front of their slave masters to consecrate their nuptials until the end of the Civil War in 1865.

And then a century later, the debate concerning interracial marriages between African-Americans and White Americans ended in 1967 when the U.S. Supreme Court declared anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional in the case of *Loving v. Virginia*.

For many African-Americans, the LGBTQ debate about the freedom to marry appears to be more than just a pimping of the civil rights movement to them. It also appears as the erasure of their history

as a people who are still striving to get what they feel LGBTQ people already have - access to mainstream society.

Racism is as rampant in the White queer community as it is in the larger society

While the feeling among African-Americans is understandable, the reason is, nonetheless, wrong. With such a myopic construction of race, the

oppressions of African-American LGBTQ people are ignored not only at the expense of the AIDS epidemic ravaging the entire African-American community, but are ignored also at the expense of combating White supremacy.

One of the real issues behind “Black homophobia” is African-Americans’ lack of understanding about the pernicious nature of White supremacy that not only impacts the lives of Black heterosexuals, but also the lives of Black women and Black LGBTQ people.

African-American LGBTQ people suffer under the reign of White supremacy as do African-American heterosexuals. Racism is as rampant in the White queer community as it is in the larger society. And one of the reasons it continues to play havoc in the lives of all African-Americans is because subcultures within the African-American community-; like straights and queers- work against each other rather than together to combat racism.

With the LGBTQ movement persistently donning a White face, all other faces of color are marginal at best and invisible at worst. And it is these faces that are also marginal or invisible within their ethnic communities. However, these faces of color become important, visible and needed to the larger White LGBTQ movement only when the White LGBTQ movement is actually pimping a Black moment of the civil rights movement for a photo-op to push its agenda.

In other words, the pimping that some African-American people scoff about in relation to the LGBTQ movement comparing its struggle to that to the Black civil rights movement are for the following reasons:

a) It is the LGBTQ movement's exploitation of Black suffering to legitimate its own.

b) It is the appropriation of the content of the Black civil rights movement, and the discarding of the context that brought it about.

c) It is White queers' rallying cry against heterosexist oppression yet dismissal of the responsibility that comes with White skin privilege.

In closing on this thought I want to say that while the war on same-sex marriage will continue to be debated in Massachusetts and across this country, in order for this victory won by the LGBTQ community to be fully embraced, understood and celebrated by the larger African-American community, the LGBTQ community must also work with African-Americans to combat their White supremacy.

Gathuo: There are those that feel that the Black community has serious and "real" issues that it is dealing with, such as lack of education achievement, access to healthcare, housing and employment; and that there is no place for an issue such as homosexuality. What's your take on this?

Monroe: First, in a community such as the African-American, one that sees oppressions in a hierarchical fashion where racism is believed to be the ultimate and in some cases the only oppression that African-American people face, issues of sexism and homophobia within the community are dismissed under the hegemonic control of Black nationalism. The connection between oppressions like racism, sexism and homophobia are eclipsed within the African-American community because of the patriarchal hold by heterosexist Black men and women.

Second, Black nationalist rhetoric that spews misogynist and homophobic invectives about women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people is not only a mainstay in hip-hop culture, but it has always been a mainstay in the Black Church.

Exhorters of the Black nationalist rhetoric, who are against same-sex unions, for example, often get so confused about the plight of African-American men in their dogged and myopic efforts to rescue

themselves as the “endangered Black man” or to restate themselves as patriarch in “the fatherless Black female-headed household,” that they do not do the requisite work to rescue African-American children and their mothers, which would ostensibly save us all.

Third, multiple family structures which same- sex marriages present, could not possibly be what Black ministers oppose because such structures are what have saved and what are still sustaining African-American families. A grandmother or an aunt and uncle raising us in their loving homes have anchored our families through the centuries. And these multiple family structures, which we have had to devise as a model of resistance and liberation, have always, by example, shown the rest of society what really constitutes family.

Boston’s conservative African-American clerics have a self-serving agenda in their denouncement of same-sex marriage. Their denouncement is said to be about the preservation of the traditional family, but the truth of the matter is their opposition to gay marriage is more about how gay marriage disrupts their rhetoric about fatherless Black households being the sole reason for the deterioration of the African-American family.

Multiple family structures which same- sex marriages present are what have saved and what are still sustaining African-American families

While one of the truths behind Black fatherlessness is economics and the systematic disenfranchisement of both African-American men and African-American women, another truth is about African-American men – from the unemployed to the mega-millionaire athlete – not taking responsibility for their progeny. And none of this has anything to do with same-sex marriage.

Fourth, with the Black Church, as one of the main institutions in the Black community that defines and controls what “Black” is and is not, very few will fall out of step with it.

But in fear of being marginalized by the African-American community, Black clerics' domination in the community will continue to be unflappable until African-American lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and our allies rise up against them. Their homophobic oppression toward us is as palpable as White racism is. And oftentimes because the oppression is coming from our community, their behavior hurts us LGBT that much more.

Fifth, while many of us LGBT people know these ministers don't practice what they preach in terms of preserving the sanctity of marriage because of the multiple families they have due to their own impropriety or dual lives they lead in hiding their homosexuality, we LGBT must not sit silent in the face of their hypocrisy. We need to call them out! The sanctity of marriage can only be preserved when we come to this sacred institution naked in the truth about our sexualities. Only then will the deterioration of the Black family begin to cease.

Gathuo: The state of the Black family in the United States is in a deplorable state: single motherhood, teenage mothers, men having children with multiple women, displaced children. What would you say to the people in the Black community who feel that homosexuality is yet another serious threat to the Black family and for that reason should not be legally sanctioned?

Monroe: I would say that homosexuality is not a threat to the Black family, but instead the threat is in the homophobia, which is contributing to the health crisis in our community.

For instance, in the early 80's when the AIDS epidemic was labeled as the "Gay Disease" that was thought to affect only White gay men in this country. The Black Church turned a deaf ear to this community's laments for help. When African-American gay men made it known that they too were affected with the disease the Black church did not offer their sons either sympathy or a prayer. Today African-Americans who comprise only 12% of the United States population make up 34% of all AIDS cases in this country, and its heterosexual

population far outnumbered its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population. The Black Church now understands there is a problem. However, because of its discomfort in addressing issues related to sexuality the Black Church's "outstretched hand" when extended is passive toward helping people who contracted the virus through intravenous drug use and not those who contracted it sexually. Second, as a people, our tenacity speaks volumes about our survival here on this American soil after centuries of slavery, decades of lynching and years of racial profiling.

As African-Americans, we have endured where others would have crumbled. As African-Americans, we have persevered where many would have given up. We as a people have always risen in the face of adversity, and have learned that even with nothing, we can still make a way out of no way.

In knowing this history and in seeing what African-Americans have done in the decades I have been alive, African-American apathy around the AIDS epidemic in Black communities eludes me.

As African-Americans we have persevered where many would have given up

In a recent study conducted in six major cities on young African-American gay men, 30 percent are infected with the AIDS virus. Right now, the state of

Black America is in a crisis. With African-American gay men at younger and younger ages being infected with the AIDS virus, along with an increase of the virus in the Black heterosexual population, the life expectancy rate of African-Americans will decline. Soon we will no longer expect today's young African-American men and women to become the elders of the community.

As African-Americans, we need a new vision. We need to see ourselves out of this dilemma with the same tenacity and agency as those who came before us worked themselves out of theirs, which is why every February we pause to honor their lives.

If we don't heed the admonition in Proverbs 29:18 - "Where there is no vision the people perish" – then we will have participated in our own genocide.

Third, the Black Church colludes in the death of our African-American gay brethren. The Church whores itself out for money from these conservative faith-based initiatives to improve the Black community, yet the Church unabashedly pimps our services, punishes our souls and lets people die without an acknowledgement and acceptance of our lives.

Fourth, within both the larger lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population, and within the larger African-American population, African-American LGBT people are the most underserved and understudied population. What we know of this population of people is mostly based on anecdotal information rather than analysis. And what I see of this population is seldom seen through the lenses of how both White queer racism and Black compulsory heterosexism exact a toll on the our lives.

As African-Americans, we need a new vision

Fifth, both the White and African-American community don't understand the two worlds we straddle. For example, a fractured group both politically and socially, African-American LGBT people reside as resident aliens who too often live bifurcated existences in both communities. While our Black skin ostensibly gives us residence in our Black communities, our sexual orientation most times gives us pending or complete eviction from it. And while our sexual orientation gives us residence in the larger LGBT community, racism constantly thwarts any efforts for coalition-building, which weakens the larger movement for sexual equality. To be tangentially aligned to these communities dangles our lives precariously on a thin thread with the nagging feeling of marginalization, if not complete dispossession.

Sixth, as African-American LGBT people, we have no language that adequately articulates the unique embodiment of us as a people and our spirituality. Looking for ways to express the ethos of who we say we

are and our spirituality, many African-American LGBT people have borrowed language from both White racist queer and Black heterosexual church cultures that, at best, have muffled our spiritual reality, and, at worst, muted it.

Gathuo: Thank you.

Rev. Irene Monroe is a Ford Fellow and doctoral candidate at Harvard Divinity School. For several years now Monroe has been writing a biweekly column here in Boston called "The Religion Thang" for In Newsweekly, the largest lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender newspaper in New England States, and also an online column "Queer Take," for The Witness, a progressive Episcopalian journal.