

INVOCATION

Time to Tune In

The Phenomenon of African American Religious Broadcasting

Shine on me, shine on me.
Let the light from the lighthouse
Shine on me.

—“Shine on Me,” in *African American Heritage Hymnal*

At the dawn of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois described the black preacher as “the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil.”¹ For the majority of the century, because of societal constraints regulating the movement of persons of color in America, these spiritual poets were largely confined to preaching to their own racial and residential communities. Today, however, with the victories of the civil rights era and the emergence of advanced forms of media communication, many of these dynamic personalities have gained wider visibility both nationally and internationally. To channel-surf from BET to TBN to MBC to the Word Network is to witness the creative genius and artistic imaginations of these religious figures. And it would be virtually impossible to enter any African American Christian congregation and find someone who had not heard of such televangelists as Bishop T. D. Jakes, Bishop Eddie Long, and Pastor Creflo Dollar. These preachers seem to have become ubiquitous in black popular culture as a result of their constant television broadcasts, mass video distributions, printed publications, gospel stage plays, musical recordings, and gargantuan congregations. With an astute marketing consciousness, these preachers and their style of ministry have found an enduring place in the African American religious imagination.

Televangelism and the Black Church in America

Any discussion of televangelism and the black church involves an engagement with two distinct areas of religious expression that have grown exponentially in the post-civil rights era: religious broadcasting and the megachurch movement. By *religious broadcasting* I am referring to the broad-based use of electronic media as a primary tool of proselytization. Religious broadcasting includes evangelists who broadcast their services on radio, television, and/or Webcasts as well as the organizations from which these persons develop, package, and promote ministry-related products like CDs and DVDs, books, conferences, and citywide crusades throughout the world. The organization can be the church where the evangelist serves or a separate entity established with the sole purpose of distributing the televangelist's message.²

The term *megachurch movement* refers to congregations with memberships of at least two thousand. Megachurches are characterized by colossal edifices that house not only sanctuaries that seat thousands of people but child care centers, gymnasiums, bookstores, and a host of other business ventures. The seven-day-a-week, one-stop-shopping design has proven itself attractive to baby boomers, "buppies" (young black urban professionals), and "unchurched" populations.³ These facilities, like suburban shopping centers, create a space for many to participate in pseudoanonymity, much as they might view a religious broadcast in the privacy and comfort of their own homes, yet remain connected to the community, "blending in" amid the thousands who show up to worship on any given Sunday. In major metropolitan areas like Atlanta, Houston, and Los Angeles, megachurches have become both a standard-bearer and a staple of African American religious life. As a result, megachurch pastors have become spiritual icons and national celebrities within the black community.

Religious broadcasting and the megachurch movement are different religious phenomena but not mutually exclusive. Being involved in religious broadcasting does not mean that one must pastor a megachurch, and vice versa. But with regard to leading African American televangelists, religious broadcasting and megachurches, though perhaps theoretically distinguishable, are inseparable in praxis. Unlike the principal players among the Christian Right and white evangelical broadcasting—James Dobson, the Crouch Family, and Pat Robertson—who control

media empires apart from a local congregation, the major producers of religious broadcasting in the African American community emerge from and remain rooted in the parish context. Thus evaluating the ministries of prominent African American televangelists requires viewing their media efforts and congregations, though distinct in principle, as symbiotic. The megachurch serves both as a site of worship and as a recording studio for television broadcasts.

The increasing occurrence of this latter dynamic in the larger evangelical world has led more astute media theorists to identify the megachurch phenomenon as religious broadcasting incarnate. This is to say, megachurches provide the mass-mediated features of televangelism that participants find attractive. Such features include TV-styled worship through the reconfiguring of traditional pulpits into theater-like stages and the installation of movie screens in the front of the sanctuary that project live footage of the worship service, the words to the congregational hymns, Bible verses, and the pastor's main sermonic points in Power Point fashion. Even church announcements and other aspects of the worship service are aired during Sunday morning service. Bishop Jakes, for instance, will dim the lights during worship service and broadcast the "Potter's House News," in which a white man behind a news anchor desk announces upcoming church events, interrupted by commercial breaks advertising Bishop Jakes's latest sermon series. Also, the majority of contemporary worship services in megachurches borrow from popular musical genres like rock, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop in a televisual manner that is clearly influenced by mainstream music videos.⁴ As I will elaborate more explicitly throughout this book, the megachurch context offers the sort of high-tech entertainment one would expect from a professional theater company or a television network. These are the reasons this book holds African American religious broadcasting and the megachurch movement in tension as it seeks to evaluate the religious world that televangelists and their viewers occupy.

To be sure, all ministers who take part in varying forms of religious broadcasting are not considered televangelists. From the number of black churches that record and sell their worship service, air their broadcast on local cable access channels or use the Web to provide streaming broadcasts of service, it is fair to conclude that the vast majority of black churches participate in some form of religious broadcasting. But there are qualitative and quantitative differences between ministries that broadcast their worship service and religious broadcasters. As stated ear-

lier, religious broadcasters are those who employ varying mass-mediated forms as the *primary* tool of proselytization. Numerous roaming television cameras, photographers, and media soundboards that serve as focal points in the sanctuary, as well as multiple broadcasts on national television networks such as TBN, CBN, BET, and Word Network, are just a few markers that distinguish bona fide televangelists from their ministerial colleagues. This is why, for example, this book features the ministry of a Bishop Eddie Long at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church but not Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell and the Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston. The latter's Sunday morning broadcasts on StreamingFaith.com pale in comparison to Bishop Long's *Taking Authority* broadcasts on nineteen different national and international television networks throughout the week.⁵ Yes, Rev. Caldwell may broadcast his Sunday service, but Bishop Long is a religious broadcaster.

The Overarching Characteristics of African American Religious Broadcasting

In his classic essay "Of the Faith of Our Fathers," W. E. B. Du Bois identifies three salient characteristics of black Christian worship. There is the preacher, whom Du Bois describes as "a leader, a politician, an orator, a 'boss,' an intriguer, an idealist."⁶ This gifted personality, according to Du Bois, combines "adroitness," "earnestness," and "consummate ability" toward obtaining and maintaining preeminent status within the community. Next is the music, which, for Du Bois, "remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil." With and through the music of the black church black people are able to express "sorrow, despair and hope."⁷ Then there is the frenzy, which Du Bois also refers to as "shouting." The frenzy is believed by many to be a visible manifestation of an invisible God, an audible praise of an ever-present God operating in the life of the believer. It is commonly articulated in many black Christian circles that "I couldn't worship a God that I couldn't feel." Whether in the form of a shout, hand clapping, or low murmurs and moans, this expression of transcendent joy rises above life's troubles to kiss the divine.

I cite Du Bois's descriptions here because they remain appropriate in relation to the world of African American religious broadcasting—a dynamic personality, a Broadway-like theater production, and a frenzy

of activity that envelops the worship experience.⁸ This is true on multiple levels and in varying ways. Both the amphitheater-like atmosphere and the mass-mediated form expand and amplify the preacher, music, and frenzy. For instance, the frenzy does not always take the form of persons “catching the Holy Ghost” and running up and down the aisles. It can also take the form of intensive buying, selling, and advertising of ministry-related products in the shopping mall-like atmosphere of the multiple concession areas that crowd the vestibules of many megachurches. Further, it can be created through pre- and postproduction editing of the television broadcasts. Slow-motion images of a pastor laying hands on the heads of parishioners and zoom-in shots of a parishioner feverishly taking notes during the sermon all express the spiritual activity taking place. For some, marking up a Bible full of sermon notes supplants participating in the ring shout. Nonetheless, in my view, these are all physical responses to a spiritual encounter, however mediated. They illustrate how African American religious broadcasting is consistent with preceding forms of black Christian practice but gives them a new mass character in this historical moment through advanced forms of media technology. Consequently African American religious broadcasting today can be defined as having the following three overarching features: it is personality driven, crowd dependent, and entertainment oriented. These features sum up the phenomenon as a whole regardless of the ecclesiastical, theological, or political perspectives of the individual ministries.

To assert that the phenomenon is personality driven is to say that the ministry is wholly developed around the charismatic authority of a particular pastor, preacher, evangelist, or revivalist. The form and function of the ministry often wholly reflect the personal narrative—real or constructed—of its leader. This is observed in the ways that viewers and parishioners often reify the charismatic leader as the church or ministry. One might notice that when people speak of a particular congregation they do not say “the Potter’s House,” “New Birth Missionary Baptist Church,” or “World Changers Church International” but “T. D. Jakes’s church,” “Eddie Long’s church,” or “Creflo Dollar’s church,” respectively.

Like movie stars, popular musicians, and athletes, these charismatic figures are seemingly transformed in the minds of their parishioners into living and breathing religious icons. Those who handle the publicity and marketing for the ministry are careful to place the physical image of the leader anywhere and everywhere so that their faces are indelibly etched

upon the psyche of their followers. As a marketing technique, such a strategy is intended to create a sense of comfort, familiarity, and intimate connection between parishioners and their “pastor,” even though, for the majority of those who purchase video series and books and pack into cathedrals and arenas, the relationship will never be more than one-sided.

Second, the phenomenon is crowd dependent. In discussing the preceding characteristic I employed Max Weber’s designation of charismatic authority as representative of the leadership style. Weber defines charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities.”⁹ Weber situates the operational function of charisma in the societal context. In Weber’s view, if a particular society is likened to a stage play, the individual possessing the charisma is the captivating main character who by virtue of his or her presence drives the production. Nevertheless a dynamic personality alone is insufficient. Charisma stems from the cooperation of the group population as much as it is projected by a particular personality. There is always a dialectical and dialogical relationship between the gifted personality and the people whom he or she seeks to engage. The people place the sacred stamp of approval on a particular personality, thus validating whether the message conveyed is a gift of God’s grace or of human origin. This is why the audience plays a critical role in religious broadcasting. Images of the crowd listening attentively, affirming sermon points with nodding heads or raised arms, are vital to a successful broadcast.

Also, to put it bluntly, radio and televangelism are expensive. There are ministries that spend millions per month. And, for the most part, pastors derive their financial support from their congregation (if they have a church), their broadcast audience, and maybe a handful of wealthy supporters.¹⁰ On the basis of our previous definition of what constitutes a megachurch, the life and vitality of the congregation, whether in terms of membership numbers or quality of services, depend on mass attendance. The more people the ministry can attract, the better the financial contributions that can subsidize and expand the television ministry or the services provided throughout the week at the church. Moreover, we live in a culture in which “might is right.” Religious phenomena are often measured quantitatively rather than qualitatively. Whenever preachers are gathered together, the response to the question “How is the church

coming?” is normally followed by a numerical figure. This is why cameras with wide-angle lenses and panoramic shots that exaggerate the size of the crowd are common. Such broadcasting techniques demonstrate that a particular preacher’s message resonates with the masses.

The final feature of African American religious broadcasting is its entertainment orientation. Whether in the sanctuary on Sunday morning, packed into Madison Square Garden at a “Partners’ Conference,” or sitting at home in a living room, people come to be entertained. Worship services combine drama, amusement, and suspense, all carefully orchestrated and premeditated in such a way that persons actually witness their own lives being acted out in the pulpit. T. D. Jakes is well known for having trained actors upon the stage acting out the parts of various biblical characters or sermon illustrations during the delivery of his sermon. Doing this—and employing other physical props for visual effect—helps viewers identify with the drama of the human condition on stage. Further, the perfectly orchestrated sermonic soundtrack via the organ response adds to the aural sense of the experience throughout the delivery of the message. As in a movie, the music of a talented organist working in collaboration with the preacher can help create tension, build suspense, and initiate celebration at the appropriate times. This tool is effective in spurring enthusiastic crowd participation.

As I make this claim, I do not employ the term *entertainment* pejoratively. Entertainment has always been a fundamental means of beating back black people’s demons of nihilism. This is true of all forms of black entertainment, whether the sultry soul rhythms of Aretha Franklin, the captivating, kinetic performance of James Brown, or the compelling, cathartic whoop of Rev. C. L. Franklin. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya have rightly described the black church as the first black theater.¹¹ Characterized by its dramaturgical sense of excitement, entertainment value, and efficacious release, its services enabled black people to act out, and in many cases imagine themselves overcoming, the tragic dimension of being black in a white supremacist society. The cacophonous guttural cries and mourning songs that emanated from victimized black bodies were mixed into a rhythmic symphony of joy as participants both sang and felt, “Up above my head, I hear music in the air.”

But beyond serving a cathartic function the entertainment orientation of black religious broadcasting has great commercial appeal. In a media age driven by style and sensory stimulation, the performative dimensions of the black preaching tradition are of great import. The aesthetic is

essential. Bishop T. D. Jakes's captivating storytelling ability, Creflo Dollar's seemingly photographic memory for scripture, and Bishop Eddie Long's Bentley in the parking lot resonate with a generation trapped in the oxymoronic matrix of reality television. Just as the televisual dimension of the music industry has forced record executives to package and promote their artists as visually tantalizing as well as vocally titillating, the same is true for African American televangelists. An outfit like a hip-hop star and sexually charged sermon titles such as "Foreplay, How to Make Your Woman Climb the Wall" and "I'm Gift Wrapped" can propel some preachers into pop culture status.¹² The performance aspect, then, plays a critical role. In describing the ministry of Creflo Dollar, one CNN reporter asserted that Dollar was "integrating show business into his business."¹³

The Scope and Aims of This Book

This book is first and foremost a scholarly work in Christian social ethics. Its primary purpose is to evaluate ethically the social implications of African American religious broadcasting as a religious and cultural phenomenon against the professed theological commitments, ecclesial agendas, and social aims of leading African American televangelists. This book is interdisciplinary, drawing on the history of both the black church and evangelical revivalism in America, philosophical and theological insights into the role of religious experience, and the work of sociologist and cultural theorists regarding class, race, and gender in America. My questions are informed by the intellectual and political tasks of cultural studies insofar as this project attempts to posit a historiographical argument, provide a theological and phenomenological account, and offer an ideological critique of the dominant themes of African American religious broadcasting. These three tasks will help us to identify and understand the production of religious meaning(s) that extend from African American religious broadcasting and their possible implications concerning how participants (both televangelists as producers and congregants as viewers) may come to interpret their world and understand themselves as classed, raced, and gendered subjects. In what follows, then, I will lay out my objectives while demonstrating how each task enables us to better appreciate the artistic import and liberating aims of black religious broadcasting while holding the phenomenon accountable for its

role as an ideological apparatus that potentially reinforces injustice and inequality in America in general and African American Christian communities of faith in particular.

Historiographical Argument

The first task of this book is to stress that African American religious broadcasting, though having flourished in the post-civil rights era, is by no means new. The electronic media have been a salient and essential part of African American Christian practices for multiple generations. The modern history of the black church includes the production of religious race records in the 1920s, radio revivals of the postwar era, and the broadcasting of worship services on television and streaming Webcast in the contemporary moment. Yet there is a lacuna in the academic literature concerning black religious broadcasters. Scholars in the fields of media and religious studies have largely failed to “tune in” to these creative men and women who have used the airwaves to influence and inform the African American religious imagination. Among media theorists and sociologists of religion who have examined religious broadcasting, it seems that African American religious broadcasters are victims of racial invisibility. Their stories have simply not been recognized. As in the case of Ralph Ellison’s classic protagonist, the very skin color that classifies people as highly visible also renders persons of African descent invisible, a categorized afterthought or addendum to the narratives of white identity and agency. And among scholars of African American religion black religious broadcasters have been seemingly rendered aberrant according to the rules of racial respectability, since their stories have not been considered consistent with the culturally accepted character of the “true black church.” Considered hucksters and ecclesiastical charlatans, figures like Prophet James F. Jones, the Detroit minister who earned national acclaim when the *Saturday Evening Post* referred to him as the “Messiah in Mink” because of his signature mink coat and lavish lifestyle, and Rev. Ike, the New York-based televangelist who was a forerunner to contemporary prosperity gospel preachers, have been buried in the shameful graveyards of black cultural memory.

The book begins, then, with an attempt to tell a different story about African American religion in the twentieth century. My purposes here are not necessarily to supplant but to problematize as well as expand the prevailing narratives concerning the form and function of the black church

in America. Chapter 1 examines the dominant historiographies offered by media and religious scholars concerning the development of religious broadcasting and the black church in America. It confronts, first, media scholars and sociologists who have presented American religious broadcasting as predominantly the domain of conservative, Anglo evangelicals and Christian fundamentalists while ignoring the contributions of African American radio and television evangelists. Then it illumines the possible reasons that most scholars of African American religion, particularly black liberation theologians, have excluded African American religious radio and television personalities from their analyses. Finally, this chapter briefly introduces the long-standing tradition of African American religious broadcasting by describing a handful of black religious broadcasting forerunners who gained national prominence through the recording and radio industries in America. Their ministries provide prototypes for the confluence of African American religious expression and mass-mediated forms.

Chapter 2 focuses on the cultural sources that informed the theology and praxis of a principal figure in the tradition of African American televangelism, Rev. Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter II, commonly known as “Rev. Ike.” Rev. Ike was one of the first African Americans to use an amphitheater as a place of worship, build an in-house video production center, and package and distribute his teachings to a national audience via television and radio. Known for his custom-tailored suits, fleet of Rolls-Royces, and charismatic and captivating ability to inspire the most socially downtrodden to walk with the confidence of a millionaire, Rev. Ike blazed a trail that black televangelists currently tread. To be sure, the point of this chapter is not merely historical. One of its primary concerns is to understand the contemporary religious phenomenon as a by-product of converging cultural practices of the past.¹⁴ Therefore, it seeks to show that the cultural and existential sources that informed Rev. Ike’s ministry have cultivated ways of thinking and practice that have become naturalized over time. I believe this examination will offer a partial explanation as to why the dominant themes of Rev. Ike’s message seemingly resonate with both preceding and successive generations in particular African American communities. And the “naturalization” of select religious ideas and customs proves to have ideological import, a discussion that will be taken up in chapters 7 and 8.

Theological and Phenomenological Account

The book now turns to providing a theological and phenomenological account of black religious broadcasting's constitutive traditions. Here my aim is to engage the phenomenon on its own terms by showing its diversity and resisting heavy-handed judgments against its leading producers. In this regard, I attempt to provide a "thick" description of black religious broadcasting while presenting the leading ministries according to their own self-understandings.

What is more, informed by a cultural studies approach, the descriptive task includes a semiotic analysis of the aesthetic dimensions of the phenomenon. This is a jazzy way of saying that this project takes seriously the fact that we live in a video age. Televangelists understand well the maxim that a picture is worth a thousand words. And if this is true of a still photograph, how much more true is it of a live broadcast? A recorded video? A streaming Webcast? Televangelists are master communicators who realize that they are talking loudly even when they are not saying anything verbally at all. Conspicuously placed diamond rings, custom-tailored suits, and state-of-the-art postproduction graphics are loaded with potential meanings. So those of us concerned with analyzing the theological reflections of the most popular religious voices in the black community today must consider both the visual and aural dimensions of their message. And for a social ethicist, focusing simply on the doctrinal correctness or systematic consistency of a televangelist's theology is insufficient. This would be comparable to trying to figure out why a highly sensual and sexualized musical performer can sell more records than a vocally trained artist. In an MTV age, the erotic aesthetic of the former typically outshines the classical ability of the latter. The same holds true for African American religious broadcasting. We must isolate and interpret the multiple signs and symbols of leading televangelists with the aim of understanding their possible attraction and cultural resonance.

Chapter 3, then, illumines the internal variety in the phenomenon of black religious broadcasting. Analytically, this chapter moves beyond the catch-all categories that do not appropriately accentuate the distinctiveness found among contemporary black televangelists. In the recent literature, the broad use of terms like *neo-Pentecostal*, *Charismatic*, *prosperity gospel*, and *new black church* to describe black religious broadcasting

in its entirety has obliterated this phenomenon's numerous ecclesiastical identities and differences.¹⁵ African American religious broadcasting is distinguishable as a cultural phenomenon but far from monolithic. For instance, Bishop T. D. Jakes, a neo-Pentecostal pastor, and Pastor Creflo Dollar, a Word of Faith pastor, have different conceptions of God, the church, and the church's role in society. It is thus inappropriate to describe the ministries that make up the phenomenon of black religious broadcasting according to terms that impose a fictitious uniformity on the widely varying theological, ecclesial, and social views of African American televangelists and megachurch pastors.

The particular aim of this chapter is to classify the diversity within African American religious broadcasting. African American televangelism is composed of and rooted in diverse (sometimes competing) theological orientations, ecclesial traditions, and political sensibilities. I propose that three representative perspectives constitute African American religious broadcasting in America: neo-Pentecostal, Charismatic mainline, and Word of Faith. To be clear from the outset, I am not arguing that *all* African American religious broadcasters fit neatly into one of these respective categories. There are exceptions to every rule. I also understand the potential dangers of drawing rigid boundaries around black Christian practices, so I would like to refrain from declaring these categories as exhaustive or absolute. But I do believe that these categories assist us, conceptually and analytically, in assessing the predominant theological traditions and ecclesial perspectives in contemporary African American religious broadcasting. Moreover, I believe that it is possible to situate the majority of current African American religious broadcasters within one of these three camps. The classification will help us examine the ministries of the foremost African American televangelists against the historical and cultural backdrop of the traditions that inform their theology, ecclesiology, and personal understanding of the church's role in society. From this we can evaluate individual ministries ethically according to their own professed ministerial objectives and intent.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the leading producers of African American televangelism who are among the most influential voices of the phenomenon and who typify the three aforementioned perspectives: Bishop T. D. Jakes (neo-Pentecostal), Bishop Eddie Long (Charismatic mainline), and Pastor Creflo Dollar (Word of Faith). Each chapter begins with a biographical sketch. Televangelists' autobiographical stories offer insight into their personal conception of God, ministerial aims, and social out-

look. This is why the biographies provided in each chapter draw from the constructed and sometimes contradictory narratives that each figure has presented of himself through sermons, writings, and rare interviews with the media. I then proceed to outline the theological thought, ecclesial outlook, and political and social orientations of Jakes, Long, and Dollar accordingly. Such questions as how they view God, God's activity in the world, and the role of the church in society and how they address the social realities of class, race, and gender drive my analysis. I particularly focus on and emphasize these questions, as the answers provide the core of my subsequent ethical critique.

I would like to address two important issues concerning chapters 4, 5, and 6. First, my reasons for focusing on the three televangelists under consideration have to do with their national prominence and popularity as religious broadcasters. They all broadcast nationally and internationally, and all three have attained a pop culture status within the African American community. Further, as already stated, I believe that their ministries epitomize the neo-Pentecostal, Charismatic mainline, and Word of Faith perspectives. This does not mean that any one of their individual theological orientations is interchangeable with that of any other televangelist coming from the same perspective. I consider both Bishop T. D. Jakes and Bishop Noel Jones to be neo-Pentecostals, but I do not claim that the theological thought of either of them is reducible to that of the other. In the same way, just because Bishop Eddie Long promotes a particular theological commitment at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church does not mean that Bishop Paul Morton adheres to the same conception of God at Greater St. Stephens Full Gospel Baptist Church, though both are Charismatic mainliners. The broader perspectives I set forth provide an ecclesial etiology of sorts so that we may account for the individual thought and practices of televangelists within a particular tradition. There is a reason that Bishop Jakes is ambivalent about active political involvement, while Bishop Long interprets his ministry and active political engagement as continuing the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. It can be found in the ecclesial perspectives from which their ministries extend, Pentecostal and black mainline, respectively. Similarly, Rev. Frederick Price's and Pastor Creflo Dollar's emphasis on positive confession and divinely ordained health and wealth is grounded in the larger Word of Faith perspective, even though the two men may not agree on every theological, ecclesial, or social matter. So although I want to be clear that each televangelist

under consideration is speaking for himself and his ministry only, I do contend that his thoughts are informed by a larger tradition and ecclesial perspective of which his ministry is a part.

The second matter involves my decision to examine only male televangelists as the representative voices of each perspective. It is no secret that although every facet of African American Christian practice is dependent on the labor of women, black Christian congregations remain predominantly headed by men.¹⁶ Black religious broadcasting is no different. Male televangelists continue to serve as the dominant producers and leading personalities. And the role of women in this phenomenon, unfortunately, continues to be sanctioned and conferred by patriarchal male authority. A cursory examination of the leading female televangelists shows that they continue to minister under subordination to a male pastoral figure, a husband, or, in the apparent majority of cases, both (their pastor is their husband).¹⁷ Moreover, the dominant theological orientations and ministerial themes of leading female evangelists are largely indistinguishable from those of the men to whom they are subordinated (i.e., their “coverings”). And while the gendered bodies of female televangelists are often used by their male colleagues in the ritual performance to reinforce and reify certain cultural understandings in ways that male bodies cannot, women are still largely reduced to proverbial props according to the rules of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. This is true even though the nontraditional religious airwaves have afforded women a level of freedom not readily conferred in the denominational churches. This is why I feel justified, if not comfortable, in focusing upon predominantly male leaders in chapters 4 through 6.

Ideological Critique

The last two chapters of this book offer an ideological critique of African American religious broadcasting. I seek to show that many of the prevailing messages and belief systems illumined in previous chapters may assist viewers to obscure reality, flatten internal contradictions, and ignore constructive alternatives for attaining desired spiritual and socio-political ends. I do, nevertheless, realize that no ideological critique can take place without acknowledging and analyzing the human interests that causes persons to gravitate toward the dominant themes televangelists transmit. Simply put, black people have spiritual, psychological, physical, and financial needs. And they would not embrace the message

of a particular televangelist, either in part or wholesale, unless they felt certain needs were being met. As ethicist Jeffrey Stout contends, ideology critique is a hermeneutical ambulance. If called upon too quickly, it can treat fellow citizens as patients rather than as moral subjects worthy of mutual respect.¹⁸ Therefore, instead of throwing out the baby of human experience with the bathwater of ideology, I wish to pay proper attention to the former.

Chapter 7, then, provides possible reasons that viewers of African American televangelism appear to gravitate toward the phenomenon. Though chapters 4 through 6 point up the internal diversity among black televangelists, the various African American religious broadcasters do express certain common identifiable themes. These dominant themes—economic advancement, the minimizing of race, and Victorian ideals of the family—have historically been offered by elites and interpreted by the masses as viable means for African Americans to integrate into mainstream culture. Despite different strategies, varying points of emphasis, and competing conceptions of divine and human responsibility among televangelists from Rev. Ike to Creflo Dollar (and everyone in between), the messages of religious broadcasting seem to strike a chord with viewers because televangelists all sing a familiar tune. The songs of immense wealth, instantaneous racial equality, and a divinely ordered family life make up the soundtrack of African American spiritual longing. And by modeling this worldview for their viewers on the screen, televangelists encourage persons to create themselves anew by imagining a world that instead of being encumbered by the realities of class, race, and gender discord expresses only possibility and potentiality. Whereas the material world of viewers may be defined by economic anxiety, discrimination on the job, or normalized attacks against black female identity in popular culture, televangelists allow persons to participate in a constructed space, if only for a moment, where they are no longer defined by their circumstances. Insofar as this is the case, this chapter encourages the reader to view televangelism as a ritual of self-affirmation for its participants.

Yet this chapter also contrasts televangelism's role as a ritual of self-affirmation against its role as a ritual of social accommodation. It reveals that televangelists rely heavily on pervasive cultural myths to garner mass acclaim. The logic is simple: the larger the crowd that televangelists seek to attract, the more they must refer to collective ways of thinking and cultural myth systems that are often used to bond otherwise diverse communities. Moral in scope and romantic in outlook, cultural myths

help us to cope with otherwise grim aspects of a society. And preachers and politicians alike appeal to these myths in order to communicate in a common language that smooths over competing worldviews and internal contradictions between a society's ideals and realities.

By referring to the theological thought, ecclesial outlook, and political and social orientations of Jakes, Long, and Dollar as set forth in chapters 4, 5, and 6, I argue that African American religious broadcasting promotes the following three cultural myths: the myth of American success (economic advancement), the myth of black victimology (the minimizing of race), and the myth of the "Strong Black Man" as savior of the race (Victorian ideals of family). While these enduring cultural myths and national ideals resonate with a cross section of Americans and are often called upon to assist us in making sense of our world, they also obscure the systems of relations operative in American society.

Here lies the link between cultural myths and ideology. The French cultural theorist Roland Barthes has argued that when cultural myths become naturalized over time and become that which is taken for granted, they serve a legitimating role.¹⁹ Whatever systems of relations are in place are deemed natural and legitimate—what has always been will always be. Appeals to the cultural myths of American success, black victimology, and the Strong Black Man legitimize conservative and anecdotal based views of wealth distribution, racial discrimination, and gender hierarchy that contradict the liberating intent of televangelists. They may also serve to anesthetize participants to the unjust ordering of the larger society even as persons seek to revolutionize their own world. So while the ritual of self-affirmation may inspire hope and optimism about achieving the ends of individual liberation, the competing ritual of social accommodation can frustrate the televangelist's professed aims by encouraging viewers to appeal, adjust, and adapt to ideological conceptions of an unjust society.

The eighth and final chapter evaluates and unpacks the three operative myths of African American religious broadcasting in relation to Jakes's, Long's, and Dollar's explicitly stated aims of economic and social empowerment for viewers. It lays out the inconsistencies and incongruities of these myths when measured against the historical and social scientific data concerning the lived realities of black people. Though images of the self-made individual inspire persons to "dream the impossible dream," they are also fuel for America's capitalist economy, which has a parasitic relationship to America's under- and working classes. It thus

appears that televangelists are prescribing business enterprise and entrepreneurship as a viable means of economic empowerment at a moment when the economic ladder of mobility is being held up away from, rather than climbed up by, the vast majority of Americans. The myth of black victimology argues that African American perceptions of racism in America are more a mind-set to be overcome than a reality to be fought against. This understanding of the social functionality of race, however, belies statistical data demonstrating that the systemic effects of white supremacy and gender discrimination continue to foster racial and gender caste systems in American society. And the myth of the Strong Black Man as savior of the race, which promotes the patriarchal ordering of society, was historically constructed out of the relational model of preindustrial slavery. In every epoch of African American history black men have sought to assert their humanity through hypermasculine displays of machismo. But rather than saving the race, movements based on masculine power have only proven to thwart the overarching aims of freedom, justice, and democracy for all. In a nutshell, the previous chapter demonstrated that televangelism has the capacity to help participants confront and temporarily endure the storms of life. This final chapter shows that televangelism also has the capacity to recreate and perpetuate the storms. In the process, the liberatory aims of leading televangelists such as Bishop Jakes, Bishop Long, and Pastor Dollar are frustrated. The functions of African American religious broadcasting as a ritual of self-affirmation and as a ritual of social accommodation conflict as the latter extinguishes the former. Thus the producers and participants of African American religious broadcasting may find themselves reinforcing the very social systems that they believe themselves to be dismantling.