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"TODAY IS THE DAY OF SALVATION": MARTIN R. DELANY'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST PROVIDENTIALISM IN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY BLACK ABOLITIONISM

Abstract:

Several scholars have acknowledged and discussed the otherworldly character of Black religion in America. From its inception in the late eighteenth century, the Black Church had embraced an otherworldly and providential theology that tied the challenges of the black struggle to the promises of a better and compensatory world to come. The adoption of this theology, however, provoked conflict with the burgeoning black abolitionist movement of the early nineteenth century. Centered on the doctrine of moral suasion, the conflict between the theology preached by some Black Churches, and the black abolitionist movement, especially in relation to the daily struggles of blacks for freedom and equality, remains a neglected subject. In the early phase of his career, Martin Delany (1812-1885) became the focus of this conflict. He made it the centerpiece of his anti-slavery crusade. Convinced that black American progress was stymied by a theology that discouraged self-deterministic initiatives, Delany publicly challenged the leading black churches, drawing attention to the limitations and problematic nature of otherworldly theology. He advanced a secularist conception of religion, one informed and driven by a self-deterministic ethos that taught blacks to rely less on the promises of a better world, and more on their own agency and capacity to transform their condition, and fulfill their destinies HERE and NOW. He described this self-determinism, secularism and this-worldly disposition as the true essence of Christianity. In the process, he brought public attention to a contradiction within black "liberation" theology. This paper is an attempt to draw scholarly attention to this critical but neglected theme in the responses of some of the leading early Black Churches to anti-slavery. Delany's crusade represented perhaps one of, if not, the earliest public articulation and defense of liberation theology by a black American.

Keywords:

Providentialism, Otherworldly, This-Worldly, Abolitionism, Colonization