

Cartwright

**“*Transcripts of the Trinity*’: Performance and Embodiment
in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century African-American Methodist Christianity”**

Proposal for the Tenth Oxford Institute: Trinity, Power and Community

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In Winton Marsalis’s brilliant composition, *“In This House, On this Morning”* the musicality and community of worship of the historic black church is rendered in a way that astonishes listeners. Marsalis, who was not raised in the black church, has managed to capture many of the nuances of that tradition, including--some might argue--some of its theological profundity. For example, Marsalis’s evocative way of rendering the music of black preaching is found in the piece called *“In the Sweetness of Life.”* Significantly, the three movements of this sermon-- *“Father”*, *“Son”* and *“Holy Ghost”*--render the vitality of Black preaching as a performance offered on behalf as well as to the community of faith which in turn is called to embody faith corporately. In this paper, I will argue that Marsalis’s instincts in this matter are not only attentive to the distinctive forms of black church sacred music, but also accurately reflects the trinitarian features of the historic black church, particularly those African-American Christian communions which stand within the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition (including some of the Holiness-Pentecostal churches). The argument of the paper proceeds in three stages.

In the first part of the paper, I will introduce the notions of “performance” and “embodiment” in relation to the broader spectrum of the Wesleyan tradition of hymnody (Charles Wesley’s poetry, etc.), as it reflects the wider traditions of Protestant and Catholic theology from Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas to Luther and Calvin as well as the Anglican divines. In the course of offering this description, I will discuss several related issues, all of which come into focus in relation to the embodiment of community, and the ways in which unresolved questions about the doctrine of the trinity can be linked to the problem of disembodiment. These problems also can be said to contribute to impoverished moral performance, such as the Euro-American Christian moral struggles with respect to the enslavement of Africans, a conflict which had devastating effects on the Methodist mission to American culture in the nineteenth century.

The second section of the paper explores trinitarian themes in the hymnody and preaching of the historic Black Church, including transatlantic examples from early nineteenth century Anglo-African Methodist preachers (John Jea) to late nineteenth century African-American Methodist figures like Daniel Alexander Payne and Bishop Henry M. Turner and other Black Church leaders such as James Theodore Holly. I will also discuss the social significance of “the spirituals” as a tradition of the Black Church, and the different ways in which this body of musical improvisatory works was regarded in relation to traditional Wesleyan hymnody, theology, and doctrine. Here again, the tension between performance and embodiment will be noted, especially as it reflects a sense of the social significance of the gathered community of faith

In the third section of the paper, I will explore the possible relationship between these musical trinitarian motifs, dislocations, and embodiments and the “ecclesiology of exile” that is described by Cheryl Sanders in her book *Saints in Exile* (1995) which explores the distinctive ecclesiology of the Pentecostal Holiness tradition of the Black Church with its well-known emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit. In particular, I will discuss the tensions that exist between various conceptions of (African-American and Euro-American) Methodist ecclesiology, and the ways these tensions reflect unresolved questions about the role of the Holy Spirit, as well as the ongoing problems of performance and embodiment.

In the conclusion of the paper, I will comment on possible trajectories for the future of Methodist theology that can be identified from the heritage of African-American Methodism (including the Pentecostal-Holiness churches) for the way we understand the social significance of the church’s mission to the world.