

Azibo Interviews Michael Tillotson, Ph.D. on Theological Misorientation



Michael Tillotson is the author of *Invisible Jim Crow: Contemporary Ideological Threats to the Internal Security of African Americans* (Africa World Press, 2011) and Assistant Professor of Africana Studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

DAA (Daudi Ajani ya Azibo): Jambo Dr. Tillotson. Asante sana (thank you very much) for answering a few questions. Your recent book *Invisible Jim Crow: Contemporary Ideological Threats to the Internal Security of African Americans* contains some thought provoking analyses of religious behavior among the African-U.S. That makes you a natural candidate for a few questions about “theological misorientation” as discussed in the Azibo Nosology II.

MT (Michael Tilloson): Thank you Dr. Azibo and the editors of JPAS for engaging me in this most propitious effort that you are undertaking with the launch of the second Nosology and may the ancestors be pleased. Chapter 5 of the book is titled: “The Mis-Direction of the Black Church.” The ideas surrounding the religiosity of the Black world that are illuminated in the text center on the disproportionate amount of weight given to the Christian idea by many African Americans and the uncritical acceptance of its principles and practices in the 21st Century. The chapter examines the impact of Theological Mis-orientation through the “Word Church” also known as (prosperity ministries) and their possible enhancement of another syndrome in the African world, namely “Materialistic Depression” which is also a central component of the Azibo Nosology.

DAA: What is your perception of theological misorientation as a concept of mental disorder? Is it legitimate? Can this concept help with the mental liberation for contemporary African descent people?

MT: As an African-centered theory, Theological Mis-orientation is clearly useful if one were to investigate for example its possible influence on the challenges of African people both domestic and international. For example when we look at Africans who practice Christianity and those who practice Islam the world sees the challenges that these religious practices have brought to Somalia. On another front if a researcher was to examine contemporary America and the pervasive, epidemic of the unbridled rush by many African Americans to forgive those individuals who engage in anti-African practices we see the possible outcomes of Theological Mis-orientation in this application as well.

The constant forgiving of Anti-African practices in a global or domestic sense and the hyper-reconciliation tendencies that can be observed in this population is quite unique to African descended people. There is broad consensus among African-centered researchers who look at behavioral health, the understanding that Theological Mis-orientation is profoundly influential on the psychological operations of people of African descent. It could be in some cases included as an operational by product of Mentacide as articulated by the late African-centered researcher Dr. Bobby Wright. Because of Theological-Misorientation there are many instances historically speaking that in many cases clouded the thinking and at times made many African descended people strangers to rational judgment. This idea often called “Colonial Christianity” was part and parcel of the success of the colonial project on many levels. It is from an appreciative critical platform that I respond to the question raised. In my view as an Applied Africana Studies practitioner “Theological Misorientation” as is operationalized in the Azibo Nosology represents a cogent analysis of a syndrome that has wide influence on the Black world.

DAA: Do you have any thoughts or commentary on the three parameters of theological misorientation--incongruity with African centered social theory, incongruity with African history, and incongruity with the deep structure of African culture?

MT: Theological-Misorientation is at acute variance with the idea of spirituality as expressed in authentic African worldview and cosmology. Quite obviously in the colonial experience and later during African enslavement alien and foreign ideas of religion were introduced and imposed on African people. These alien spiritual systems are not in harmony with the deep structure of African culture and have led to observable syndromes in the African world. As a deleterious by product of Anti-African, anti-egalitarian ideologies Theological Misorientation reduces collective agency in the African world because it places artificial differences/boundaries between people of African descent and many times gives shelter to evils against the Black world.

DAA: Several sub-disorders of theological misorientation were advanced. Is there a feature or property of any one of them you would like to make special mention of? Your work is especially referenced regarding Self Serving Spirituality disorder. Any comments?

MT: The sub-disorders as articulated in the Nosology work well in a variety of circumstances and have wide application for researchers.

DAA: Do you perceive any shortcomings or problems with the theological misorientation concept? How might the concept be improved?

MT: One area that I would like to see explored is how Theological Misorientation impacts and influences public policy among African Americans. In my view the theory is complete but I propose a research project using a mixed method approach to qualitatively and quantitatively expose the effects of Theological Misorientation on attitudes, particularly in terms of looking at and critiquing activities by public figures that are ill suited to the wellbeing of the Black world.

DAA: Any thoughts on how theological misorientation can be lessened in African descent people by mental health professionals? By religious professionals? Do Africana Studies scholars have a role to play in this?

MT: An understanding of the negative cascading effects of Theological Misorientation on the Black world must be introduced to African descended people in the same way alien spiritual systems have been aggressively given a so-called “Normative” location. In some sectors of Black life it is almost verboten to discuss indigenous spiritual systems unless one is willing to endure pejorative responses such as: voodoo, witchcraft, sorcery, and various other nomenclatures. Therefore, a patient, nuanced and sophisticated explanation of indigenous African spiritual systems and their advantages for the Black world would also be of great benefit. It stands to reason that when engaging in transformative conversations in the modern world, one could look at other successful human groups and point out the congruency of those groups to their native religious practices that mirror their history and culture. It would also be of great benefit to the Black world to institute Theological Misorientation as an intervention by behavioral health practitioners in terms of treatment modalities both in private and public settings.

Instructive in this regard is an article written in the *Journal of African American Studies* titled: “Finding a Voice: an Allocentric Worldview to Guide Effective Reduction of Behavioral Health Disparities in African Americans”. The aforementioned work is the first time that Africana Studies, Nursing and Social Work have collaborated on an issue of agency and behavioral health in the history of the American Academy. This is just another way Africana Studies as a distinct academic discipline must continue to insinuate itself into broader conversations about issues that influence and impact the Black world.

DAA: It is often lamented that “you can’t take Jesus or you can’t take Allah from African descent people!” Is this mental incarceration? What must happen for the theological misorientation concept to prevail?

MT: In a perfect world if we could go back and re-write the history of African people and take away this populations incentive to place their faith disproportionately in alien religious ideas there would not be a need for the operationalization of Theological Misorientation. The yoke of foreign spiritual systems is strong in the Black world and showing no signs of reduction in modernity. However, if in fact the above statement in the question above is true, henceforth Black Liberation Theology must be re-visited on a more robust level in the 21st Century by agency driven, African-centered researchers and clergy. We know that social justice issues and ideas of collective African agency have taken a back seat in a large majority of the pulpits of the Black world, however, often times as observation has shown when African people are introduced to an alternative vision of agency through the Christian idea they are receptive in many cases. It is when Agency driven Christianity (Black Liberation Theology) is demonized for political purposes like we witnessed during the 2008 presidential campaign that African people are given a distorted view of the distinctives of Black Liberation Theology. The understanding of Theological Misorientation as a collective intervention for those African people who cannot be dissuaded from an uncritical allegiance to Colonial Christianity must be advanced. The transformation of African descended people into a population of people open to alternative viewpoints and shifted into practicing more authentic African forms of spirituality is a herculean task to say the least...but worth every effort.