

# THE BLACK CHURCH AND WOMANIST THEOLOGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR REFUGEE WOMEN

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## Introduction

The African American religious tradition from which I speak has a history which reaches, in consciousness and memory, back to Africa; was expressed concretely (though surreptitiously) during slavery; and was organized along denominational lines, beginning with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, sixteen years into the nineteenth century. Although this tradition is primarily Christian and Protestant, American forms of Catholicism and Islam have been influenced either by modes of worship or by theological interpretation derived from African American history and culture.

A symbiotic relationship exists between the African American religious tradition, as embodied in the Black Church, and African American life and culture. It is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about the latter without reference to the former. For example, most African American leaders were socialized during their formative years in a black congregation of some type; and most African Americans in music had their initial training as a vocalist or instrumentalist in a church choir. Few of us have forgotten the recitals, pageants, Easter and Christmas presentations we performed before members of our church congregations, including extended families of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, and proud parents who supported us in our efforts to master the oral tradition, the hallmark of African American culture. Bible stories and sermons preached from favorite texts (the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, the Twenty-Third Psalm) provided the framework for our belief in the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule, as did such hymns as "Amazing Grace," "Precious Lord," "I Love to Tell the Story," "Power, Power, Power, Wonder Working Power in the Blessed Name of the Lord," "How I Got Over," and "In That Great Gittin' Up Morning."

At the same time, we learned from the social structure of the church that men were powerful, and women were important but subordinate. Women wore white on communion Sunday, taught Sunday School in the primary grades, prepared and served breakfast before church and dinner after, were the nurses in white at funerals, and (if slim, fashionable, and well-spoken) read the announcements from the bulletin each Sunday. Women were evangelists, and some led the worship service and the testimonials before the service; women were ushers who showed parishioners to their seats, provided programs listing the order of service, gave out fans from a local funeral home when it got too hot, and passed the collection plate along the rows before pouring the contents into large baskets held by men at the front of the church. There were always more women in the choir than men; sometimes, though not often, a woman played the piano and/or organ and served as Minister of Music.

Men, on the other hand, though less numerous, constituted the ministerial staff and sat in high-backed chairs on the pulpit, in long robes, with Bibles in their laps; or they were deacons or members of the board of trustees, and sat in the congregation in rows reserved for those groups. In some churches, women augmented the music with tambourines; in those churches where the Holy Spirit was welcomed, it was the women who shouted and did the Holy Dance, while a deacon or two might urge the preacher of the hour to "make it plain." In the church of my youth, men were called to the ministry, but women were not. Women tithed, as did men; they launched bake sales and served on the Pastor's Aid Society to support the church financially. Women were the pillars of the church, but their interests were rarely served because they were always subordinated to those of men or children. As a youth participant I found the Black Church nurturing; but as an anthropologist concerned about women's issues, I find the Black Church in its patriarchy to be a structure of dominance and oppression in need of fundamental change.

### Black Theologians

Howard Thurman in 1949 and Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963 approached the significance of the Black Experience in moral and religious terms, speaking with eloquence about transcendence through spirituality and love, about goodness driving out evil and love conquering hate. Thurman's classic work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, posits that Jesus is at one with "those who stand at a moment in history with their backs against the wall." For Thurman, the challenge is for the marginalized to confront and transcend fear, deception, and hate by embracing love, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. For King, it is to have the strength to love one's enemies. Both challenge the Christian Church to do more for those who are oppressed. Neither speaks specifically of the Black Church or of black women, men, or children; rather, their God talk is at the level of the Christian Church in relation to black congregants and their situation in America.

By contrast, James Cone's writings have addressed the question of a Black theology of liberation, and he has called for support of Black feminist theology, arguing that neither white feminists nor black male theologians have addressed the issues of concern to black women theologians (nor can they).

### Womanist Theologians

As might be expected, African American female theologians address the issue of patriarchy in the Black Church and have agreed, for the most part, to call themselves womanist rather than feminist (womanist denotes a black feminist). According to its proponents, womanist theology is an emergent theology in its own right, but it is inclusive and open to other traditions. Its aim is to listen to the voices of the women who preceded us, and then to be inspired by their example. For example, in 1836, Jarena Lee asked to be ordained by the founding bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Richard Allen, but was refused; and one Elizabeth, who was without a surname, reported in 1863 of being prohibited by black men from preaching. Yet both Jarena Lee and Elizabeth defied the strictures of their times and went on to preach the gospel, acknowledging the call to the ministry by God. In addressing patriarchy in the Black Church, womanist theologians are prepared "to challenge the values of domination and structures of oppression in the church and society where they seek to do the work of God's Reign."

## Feminist Theologians From the Third World

Third World feminist theologians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have taken on the dual tasks of a "critique of and struggle against all forms of oppression resulting from patriarchy and the reform, reconstruction, and reinterpretation of Christian tradition . . . in the light of women's experience, and with a critical attitude toward the socially and historically constructed notion of gender." For example, in the missionary zeal to stamp out polygamy in Africa, men with more than one wife were required to choose one for a monogynous relationship; the others were abandoned to single motherhood without a corresponding social structure for their protection and support. As a result, women found themselves homeless and with no means for taking care of their children. Clearly, the early missionaries had no concern about consequences. In other instances, depending on circumstances, feminists are calling for transformations in Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and the Apache religious tradition.

## A Theology Addressing Experiences of Refugee Women

Given my experience in visiting refugee situations around the world, I had hoped to find the refugee experience included in feminist or womanist theology, to address the evil perpetrated against women during war and its aftermath. During a war, women are expected to endure the inevitability of being sinned against; afterwards, they are expected to accept the structures of a male-dominated way of life.

In outlining the parameters of womanist theology, Delores Williams, one of its most articulate proponents, recounts the Biblical story of Hagar, an African slave from Egypt who is in service to Abraham and Sarah. As a result of rape, she gives birth to a son and is subsequently turned out of the house with him, becoming displaced. Elsewhere, Williams recounts that women in the patriarchal black church account for 80 percent of its membership; refugee women and children constitute 80 percent of the world's refugee population. And, like Hagar, the women are subject to sexual violence, marginalization, and displacement.

Given that both Third World feminist theology and womanist theology are "concerned with the liberation of women from oppression," the tradition of suffering endured by refugee women would certainly qualify their experiences for inclusion. Let me give three examples.

In June 1996 I visited a camp for displaced persons just outside Freetown, Sierra Leone. There were thirty women in the room, each wearing a head tie and wraparound skirt. They are rural women; only one has been to school and is literate in English. Three professional Sierra Leonean women are translating Krio into English. My delegation knows that many child soldiers have been kidnapped from their villages, to fight either for the guerrillas or for the military. We ask the mothers about their concern for the child soldiers. One answers for the rest: "We need two things, forgiveness and treatment. Forgiveness because in most cases the children were taken away against their will; treatment because we need help in bringing these boys back to their families and communities." The mothers are willing to let bygones be bygones;

there is no hint of vindictiveness or revenge in her voice. Clearly, these women need help in restoring normalcy to their shattered lives. They cannot do it alone, nor should they.

In August 1995, I was in Mozambique to witness the conclusion of the largest repatriation in Africa: two and a half million people had returned from six neighboring countries after thirty years of war. In several remote villages, I notice long lines of women waiting to grind corn. The grinding machines, owned by men, are large, cumbersome, very noisy and often in need of repair. I ask one of the relief workers how long the wait is; sometimes three days, he tells me. And then he tells me a story I am sorry to hear: a woman from a neighboring village came to grind her corn. It took three days before it was her turn. When she returned home, she found her three children had suffocated and died. She then committed suicide. Women need appropriate technology and labor-saving devices to assist them in their many tasks; there has to be a better way.

I had the occasion to evaluate a UNIFEM-funded program entitled African Women in Crisis (AFWIC), designed to assist the development efforts of women who are refugees or internally displaced, or who have recently returned to their countries of origin. In Kenya, I interviewed a woman from Burundi who had served as a consultant to an AFWIC peace mission in Bujumbura. This is an excerpt from what she had to say:

"In hindsight, a lot could have been done to avert the war which began in 1993, but we tended to ignore the signs, the handwriting on the wall. If we had just paid attention! We did not recognize or acknowledge the first signs -- for example, the escalation of violence, which we took to be either normal or an isolated incident. We should have paid attention to poverty, land tenure issues, environmental degradation, democracy, human rights, civic education, and respect for others.

"Women's awareness about things gone awry could have allowed us to act in time. Women in town have lessons in humility to learn from rural women, who are closer to the issues than we are. But they tend to defer to us, the educated, the literate, the city-dwellers, because they think we know better than they; but we don't. We need to empower rural women.

"Another issue is that women have tried to be like men, rather than value our gifts as women. We know what keeps us apart, but we must find the commonalities of our suffering and its source in order to learn from our mistakes. We need to dig into the past to look at our history as a way of determining commonalities of our values to build on for the future: shared experience, insights, and wisdom.

"In closing, I have to say that the tension between groups of Africans within the nation-state is more than ethnicity. In Rwanda and Burundi, Tutsi and Hutu lived for more than four thousand years; why the problems now? The problems are the result of cultural imposition leading to the Westernization of urban elites, which in turn has led to collective resistance by those marginalized by the situation. They lack positive identification and a sense of belonging to the self, family, group, community, and nation. They are have-nots with nothing to lose."

Clearly, the insights provided by this interviewee are not limited to Burundi or Rwanda. Wherever there is conflict, there are those with vision who need support. Where are those who would provide opportunities for rural women to have their voices heard, to be assured that their insights are welcomed and will be acted upon? Where are those who would assure women that their intuition is sound, that their sensitivity

to circumstances gone awry will be taken into account? Where are those who will affirm the uniqueness of women and not expect that they must behave like men to succeed? While 1997 was declared the Ecumenical Year of Churches in Solidarity with Uprooted People, a parallel commitment needs to be the prevention of uprootedness.

## Conclusion

The African American religious tradition developed in the context of slavery, the civil rights movement, and the contemporary period. Today, women of color across the globe are challenging structures of dominance and oppression in the patriarchy of the world's religions. As a result, "[p]oor and oppressed women in the Third World, women of color in America, indigenous people all over the world" are responding positively. Using the African American experience as a point of departure, we see its challenge to the Christian Church in the position taken by black theologians in their articulation of a theology of black liberation.

Absent the voices of black women, and the result is womanist theology. Wherever voices are silenced, space has to be made for their inclusion. And so it is with refugee and internally displaced women. Since one third of the world's refugees are in Africa, and since womanist theology is Afrocentric in its conception as well as inclusive of other traditions, an embrace of the circumstances endured by African women in crisis is an appropriate response. In the same way, then, that feminist theology in the Third World has become more complex since black feminist consciousness emerged in black women's struggle against the sexism of black men and the racism of white women, we hope that other religious traditions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America will accept the challenge to respond to displaced populations of women as well. We welcome global responses to global issues.