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Professor Thomas Jefferson Pugh
IN MEMORIAM

Professor Thomas Jefferson Pugh, October 25, 1917—February 9, 1994, considered by many the “Father” of Pastoral Care and Counseling in African American theological education, was a member of the faculty of the Interdenominational Theological Center for thirty-five years. He served as Professor of Psychology and Pastoral Care as well as occasional administrative posts, including Vice President for Academic Services. Dr. Pugh was a national figure in the advocacy and training of Black clergy for greater visibility and participation in the growing field of pastoral care and counseling.

In 1962 he helped to found the Georgia Association for Pastoral Care and served on the adjunct staff of the Association. In an eloquent eulogy at Friendship Baptist Church in Atlanta on February 12, 1994, Dr. Richard Hester, executive director of the Association, gave high praise to Dr. Pugh’s pioneering work in helping to develop pastoral counseling services, Clinical Pastoral Education, and graduate training programs for theological students and ministers in the Atlanta metropolitan area.

Dr. Pugh was a graduate of Clark College and Atlanta University, Gammon Theological Seminary, and Boston University where he earned the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology and Religion. He began teaching at the I.T.C. in 1958 as a member of the faculty of Gammon and professor of the Psychology of Religion. He also taught at Albany State College in Albany, Georgia, and at Bryant Theological Seminary in Fitzgerald, Georgia.

He is survived by a loving and devoted wife, Angelia;
two sons; mother, mother-in-law; a grandson and granddaughter; and by many nieces, nephews, and cousins. He will long be remembered by hundreds of I.T.C. graduates around the world and by numerous colleagues at the Center and other institutions whose awareness of the deep sensitivity and skill that the gospel calls for in the care of souls was sparked and nurtured by the teaching of Thomas Jefferson Pugh.

In October 1992 the Board of Trustees of the Center voted to name a new and long-awaited facility at I.T.C., “The Thomas J. Pugh Pastoral Counseling Center.” It will be housed in the building now being erected on the campus and will be dedicated in May, 1994 as the James H. Costen Lifelong Education Center.

The Journal of the I.T.C. joins the family, the campus community, and a far-flung host of alumni/ae and friends in thanking God for the life and work of a great scholar, master teacher, compassionate counselor, and loving friend. Tom Pugh will be sorely missed by all of us here at the I.T.C., but emboldened by his courage and emulating his faithfulness, we pray with humble supplication and yet unbounded confidence, that great petition of the ecumenical Church:

O Lord: support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
Acknowledgement

At the close of the current academic year, the beloved editor of the *Journal of Interdenominational Theological Center*, Dr. Gayraud S. Wilmore, will retire after serving this publication for four years. His editorial work, during this brief span, has been important in many ways, but especially so for the following three reasons. Firstly, he has returned JITC to its proper publication schedule, a task which involved the production of six volumes in the space of four years. Thus, the volume now going to press—even as I write this—is Volume 21, Nos. 1 and 2, dated Fall 1993 and Spring 1994. The next volume—Volume 22—is scheduled for Fall 1994. When he accepted this editorship in 1990, we were four volumes behind in our publishing schedule.

Secondly, Gayraud, with his constant and rigorous attention to content and stylistic detail, has reestablished earlier publishing standards, thereby making our publication beyond reproach.

Thirdly, Gayraud has served as the General Editor of the Black Church Scholars Series published by the ITC Press. In this capacity, he has supervised the publication of five volumes.

While we at the ITC fully realize that we can never repay Gay for services rendered, we did seek to express our indebtedness to him by a reception held in his honor at ITC on March 23, 1994. At that time each segment of the ITC family offered a public demonstration of its love.

This retirement of Gayraud as Editor of JITC comes shortly after a prior retirement from the ITC faculty in 1990. At his latest retirement reception, he said that this would be his last. However, knowing Gayraud and knowing the manifold gifts in his possession,
none of us would be surprised to find him elsewhere, serving the Lord in ways that only he can muster and master. We hope for him the best in his future.

John C. Diamond, Jr.
Chairperson,
Academic Publications Committee
Interdenominational Theological Center
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Martin Luther King, Jr.: Sixty-Fifth Anniversary Overview and Assessment

No one made a greater impact upon the struggle for racial justice in America than Martin Luther King, Jr. Before King, America was a contented segregated society—de jure in the South and de facto in the North. The idea of racial equality and freedom was a marginal issue in American life, seldom mentioned by government officials and other public figures, and largely confined to the legal work of the NAACP and the academic writings of a few scholars. Looking back over the years from the vantage point of what would be his sixty-fifth birthday—he was born on January 15, 1929—it is clear that Martin King changed all that. Through his civil rights activity, public speeches, and writings, he placed the problem of race at the center of American life and forced this nation to acknowledge racism as its greatest moral dilemma.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born into a prominent middle class family in Atlanta, Georgia. His father, Martin Luther King, Sr., was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and also active in the NAACP. At home and at church, “M.L.,” as the younger Martin was called during his childhood, acquired ethical and religious values that influenced him to become a minister and to devote his life to the struggle for justice.

After his graduation from Morehouse College, in Atlanta, he went to Crozer Theological Seminary, at that time in Chester, Pennsylvania, and later entered Boston University where he received a Ph.D. degree in systematic theology. King’s education

*Charles Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology, Union Seminary in New York City and Contributing Editor of the JITC.
played an important role in shaping his views about race and justice in the United States. At Morehouse the problem of racial injustice in the social, economic, and political life of America was frequently discussed in his classes. He was a sociology major. Benjamin E. Mays, who was the president of Morehouse, and George Kelsey, a professor in the Department of Religion, showed King that the ministry could be socially relevant and intellectually respectable.

At Crozer and Boston University King was introduced to theological and philosophical ideas about God, social justice, and the worth of human personality that reinforced what he had learned from his parents and heard in the sermons, prayers, and songs of Black churches. With an intellectual foundation for his religious convictions, he began his pastoral ministry at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, in September 1954—about three months after the celebrated Supreme Court decision that outlawed segregation in public schools.

Martin King did not go to Montgomery with the intention of starting a national civil rights movement. His social consciousness was defined primarily by the NAACP, an organization he greatly admired. Shortly after arriving at Dexter he influenced the church to become its largest contributor in Montgomery. He was also active in human relations organizations that brought a few Black and White middle-class professionals together to talk about how to improve race relations. There was nothing in King's graduate school essays or his sermons at Dexter and other Black churches that suggested that he was interested in organizing a mass movement, or that he would become America's most influential radical in the African American struggle for racial justice.

King was a reluctant radical. He did not start the Montgomery bus boycott that made him an internationally known leader. The boycott was begun by a group of Black professional women (Women's Political Council) when they decided that the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, for defiance of the bus-
Martin Luther King, Jr.

seating law, should not go unchallenged. They organized a protest and asked King and other ministers in the city to join them. Initially, King was reluctant to become involved and asked for time to think about it. The preparations for a full-scale boycott of the city buses moved so fast that he was surprised when he was chosen as the leader. He did not decline the choice (as he had done earlier when asked to be the president of the NAACP) because he believed that the call came from God who was acting through the people, empowering them to protest.

With only twenty minutes to prepare the most important speech of his life, King stood before an overflowing crowd of five-thousand Blacks and told them that “we are not wrong in what we are doing.” Both the God of the Bible and the Constitution of the United States gave people “the right to protest for right.” Through an appeal to the biblical idea of justice and the American democratic tradition of freedom, King urged the masses of Blacks to “stick together” and have “the moral courage to stand up for their rights.” They did. For three-hundred and eighty-one days, fifty-thousand Black men, women, and children, under King’s courageous leadership, “walked the streets of Montgomery with dignity rather than ride the buses in humiliation.” They substituted tired feet for tired souls” and, thereby, created a “New Negro,” one who was ready to die for freedom.

The Montgomery bus boycott marked the beginning of masses of people being involved in the struggle for racial justice. It was followed by the sit-ins in 1960, the freedom rides in 1961, and many other organized demonstrations for freedom throughout the South. The social disruption that the civil rights movement created forced the great majority of White people to re-evaluate the meaning of America for her citizens of African descent. Although there were many courageous and intelligent activists in the civil rights movement, Martin King was its most influential leader and philosopher.
Martin King developed a philosophy and a method of social change, described as nonviolent direct action, that was effective in destroying legal segregation and blatant klan-like activity throughout the South. It also transformed the social and political relations of Blacks and Whites across the nation. Infusing Mahatma Gandhi’s method of nonviolence with the spirituality of the Black churches, King, in his sermons and writings, urged Black people to nonviolently disobey laws that transgressed their dignity as human beings. He challenged Whites to join Blacks in the struggle for justice because, as he often said, we are all “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” King challenged politicians to recognize that America cannot claim to be the leader of the free world and also remain a segregated nation. “If democracy is to live,” he said, “segregation must die.”

After the Montgomery bus boycott, King’s most successful campaigns were the Birmingham demonstrations (1963) and the Selma March (1965). Both events created so much social disruption that the leaders of the federal government were pressured into enacting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. King’s most memorable speech was his great “I Have a Dream” address at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, where he electrified the nation with the hope that America would become a just society, an integrated community without racial animosity or religious prejudice. In the eyes of most who loved and adored him it was his greatest moment. Time magazine chose him as the “Man of the Year” and called him “the unchallenged voice of the Negro people—and the disquieting conscience of the whites.” King also received the Nobel Prize in 1964, thereby making him not just a Black or an American leader, but a world spokesperson for justice and peace.

However, the most radical phase of Martin King’s work began after the Selma March. At first he thought that the widespread support for the voting rights of Blacks meant that his work as
a civil rights leader was almost over. But he was grossly mistaken. His most difficult battles for justice were still ahead of him. The Los Angeles riots that began on August 11, 1965, which happened only five days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Bill into law, revealed despair among Black people like King had not seen in the South. When he took the movement to Chicago to fight against *de facto* segregation in housing, education, and employment, he soon realized that the racism that undergirded economic exploitation in the Northern cities was much more entrenched and detrimental to the humanity of Blacks than the racism that perpetrated legal segregation in the South. The liberal Northern Whites in government, churches, and labor who supported the civil rights movement in the South often opposed it in the North. Getting rid of legal segregation did not cost America much. But to rid the nation of economic poverty would cost plenty. King's estimate was a hundred billion dollars.

With an escalating war in Vietnam, President Johnson and the Congress were not interested in paying the cost to eliminate domestic poverty. King knew, therefore, that his linking together war, poverty, and racism would not win him friends among Whites and Blacks in government, the churches, the civil rights movement, and even among his own staff and board of directors of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Many of his friends pleaded with him to stick with civil rights and to stop talking about the war, because the civil rights and peace movements were distinct and separate. But King vehemently disagreed, saying that the "two problems are inextricably bound together," because "you can't have peace without justice and justice without peace."

King's finest hour as an anti-war activist was his "Beyond Vietnam" speech at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967. Before a capacity crowd, he called the war immoral and unjust and then proceeded to indict America as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." He spoke as a "child of God and brot-
er to the suffering people of Vietnam,” whose land, home and culture were being destroyed. “Somehow this madness must cease,” he proclaimed. “We must stop now.”

On April 15, King spoke at a United Nations rally to end the war and called America’s involvement in Vietnam an attempt to “perpetuate white colonialism.” He urged President Johnson to “stop the bombing” and “save American lives and Vietnamese lives.” In almost every sermon and address, he called upon Americans to protest “one of history’s most cruel and senseless wars.”

President Johnson and his supporters were greatly troubled by King’s decision to join the voices of protest in the peace movement against the Vietnam war. Once the most beloved of all civil rights activists, who could get audiences with the President and other government officials, King became regarded as an arrogant Negro preacher who spoke out on foreign policy issues for which he had no expertise whatsoever. Media editorials criticized him severely for making the “serious tactical mistake” of fusing the civil rights and peace movements. Prominent civil rights leaders disassociated themselves from him and ignored his demand that they “take a forthright stand on the rightness or wrongness of the war.”

Martin King’s spirituality sustained his radicalism in the midst of extreme controversy. He really believed that “all reality hinges on moral foundations.” Hostile criticism did not persuade him to keep quiet, or to soften his views about the war. His perspective was not defined by what was politically expedient or financially beneficial for S.C.L.C. Rather, King’s radicalism was defined by his personal faith, his deep conviction that “the universe was on the side of right.” “When you stand up for justice,” he said, “you never fail.”

As friends rejected him and the government turned his dream of a just and peaceful world into a nightmare of violence, King’s faith gave him hope. Instead of making him passive, his belief
in “cosmic companionship” empowered him for radical action. He moved toward a socialist path, condemning capitalism and advocating the need for a root and branch restructuring of the whole of American society. During his later years, he became especially disappointed with liberal Whites. He called them “unconscious racists,” because their responses to the riots, showed that they were “more concerned about order than they were about justice.” He then began to move toward an acceptance of Black Power and even advocated “temporary segregation” as the only way to achieve genuine integration. Of course, King was no separatist in the sense advocated by Malcolm X. But since tokenism was the only kind of integration that Whites were implementing, he became concerned that Blacks would be integrated out of the little power that they had managed to amass. He became so militant and Black that a New York Times reporter told him that he sounded like a nonviolent Malcolm X.

Although King rejected any public association with Malcolm X, he realized that their views were converging and, through mutual friends, he took private initiatives to meet with Malcolm. Malcolm was assassinated the Sunday (February 21, 1965) before their meeting scheduled for the following Tuesday.

Approximately three years after Malcolm's death and exactly one year after his “Beyond Vietnam” speech, Martin King himself was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. It was April 4, 1968. At the time, he was organizing a march for sanitation workers on strike for better pay and improved job conditions. He was also preparing for the Poor People’s Campaign which was to take place in Washington, D.C. Both events highlighted his fight against racism and poverty. In his second March on Washington, unlike the first in 1963, he did not have the support of the President and the Congress. He was planning a militant civil disobedience that was designed to pressure Congress into enacting legislation that would guarantee employment and, for those unable to work, a decent
Eighteen years after his assassination, the Congress and President Reagan established, January 20, 1986, as a legal public holiday in celebration of King's birthday—the only American to receive such an honor. This honor is both an acknowledgement of his great moral power and an attempt to co-opt his radicalism. Through his powerful oratory and militant, nonviolent civil rights activity, he inspired Blacks and pricked the consciences of Whites, thereby enabling both, along with other Americans, to join together in a common struggle for justice. What King created was a coalition of conscience among people of all races and faiths who came together under his leadership to transform the meaning of America—from a nation of White people to a nation of all the people. That was no small achievement!

The meaning of Martin Luther King, Jr. is not defined primarily by the civil rights laws that he pressured the government to enact. His radicalism was derived primarily from the moral power he embodied in his life and message—transcending race, religion, culture, and nationality. He was America's moral conscience. When he spoke, America and the world listened, even though they did not always obey his call to end racism, poverty, and war. His moral power has inspired people struggling for justice around the world. Andrew Young correctly observed that "When the Berlin Wall came down, they were singing 'We Shall Overcome.' When the Polish shipyard workers went on strike, they were singing 'We Shall Overcome.' When the students went to Tiananmen Square, they wrote 'We Shall Overcome' on their T-shirts. It is clear that the legacy... [of] Martin Luther King... was universal."

Because King inspired people to fight for justice, he also frightened government leaders. J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI Director, called him "the most dangerous Negro in America." Most government officials, including President Johnson, agreed and thereby made him the most reviled person in America at the time of his
assassination. But despite the moral blindness of yesterday's politicians, few people today can deny that Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black preacher of nonviolence and love, was America's most effective radical and its most courageous prophet.
Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters: The Model of Hebrew Prophecy in the Ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream!" Martin Luther King Jr. leavened much of his oratory with this famous quotation from the prophet Amos (5:24). Easily King's favorite biblical verse from either testament, it recurs throughout his sermons, speeches, interviews, magazine articles, and books. He used it in his address at the Holt Street Baptist Church on December 5, 1955, the crucial first day of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He used it in his last public address on April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated in Memphis. King drew upon this quotation for its powerful life-affirming imagery, for its authoritative voice, for its grounding deep in our Judeo-Christian ethical tradition. The frequency with which King quoted this verse is arguably the major reason it is so familiar to us today.

Some observers dismiss the Amos quotation as little more than emotional filler for King's oratory, providing neither depth nor insight into his ultimate concerns.¹ King's choice, though, is significant in and of itself: not the words of Jesus on loving our enemies, not the letters of Paul on faith, hope, and charity, but the spoken oracle of a Hebrew prophet, adopting the voice of God in demanding from God's people a torrent of reinvigorating justice. It becomes

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all the more significant as an inaugurating and recurring theme of King’s public ministry. Moreover, King’s many other quotations of, references to, and adoptions of the “thundering voice” of the Hebrew prophets (to the widest variety of audiences) belie any casual dismissal. In the hearts of the prophets, in their words, in their deeds, King found a model for his own ministry, his own integration of preaching, action, and conscientious witness—which he urged others, both clergy and laity, to adopt. In the prophets’ responses to the great social crises of their days King heard voices resonating with his own response to the modern social ills of racism, materialism, and militarism.

A close examination of three of King’s sermons and speeches will reveal an increasing and authentic urgency in his message during the last three years of his life, 1965-68—a time characterized by Kenneth Smith as “The Radicalization of Martin Luther King, Jr.”2—when America experienced a profound social crisis, expressed in urban riots, antiwar demonstrations, and widespread erosion of confidence in our governing institutions. Such an examination will also reveal an increasing reliance on the Hebrew prophets for the content of their message, for the style of their delivery, and for their action-defined roles in Israelite society.3

More than King’s writings for publication,4 his spoken words evoke five major themes from Hebrew prophecy: a sense of

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3 Focusing on three of King’s delivered but unpublished addresses will accomplish three other goals: first, it will refine and concentrate the scope of this inquiry; second, it will allow a deeper analysis of certain works that may serve as windows to his life and work, considered more comprehensively; and third, it will make a contribution to scholarship on his writings that have not been as widely available, nor as seriously examined as his published materials.

4 The published writings are consistent with the prophetic model, but not as dramatically compelling as his delivered addresses. Many scholars stress the primacy of the preached (and largely unpublished) word in understanding King. Cf. (in bibliography) articles by James Cone, David Garrow, Richard Lischer, and Keith Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
direct calling by God to speak the word of God; an overriding concern for ethical obedience to God’s righteous covenant as authentic religious devotion; a passion for social justice which expresses our ethical obedience; a conviction that God’s active presence in the world does not preclude but in fact demands a human response; and finally, a mixture of comforting, hopeful words along with doomsaying judgments. These themes form a core prophetic message—by no means exhaustive—on which King relied for the content of his own prophetic message. Closely related to content, the prophetic forms of speech adopted by King amplified his message and allowed it to resonate. Finally, King’s understanding of the social context of the prophets influenced his own role in American society—combining opposition to established powers with an enduring faith in the original principles of American democracy—which occasioned his incisive yet always constructive criticisms of current American society. Like the prophets, King criticized governing institutions in a radical but non-systemic way. Considered together, these facets of the prophetic model enabled him to speak and act with an authority and an authenticity few other public figures have been able to muster before or since.

After Amos, King drew on Micah and Isaiah most frequently in his sermons and speeches. Amos describes himself as a Judahite dresser of sycamore trees, called to prophesy against the northern kingdom; Micah as a country dweller decries the abuses of city and court life; and the first Isaiah, as a court/cult prophet, sees more clearly the saving purposes of God working through the

\footnote{E.g., he never advocated the restructuring—violent or otherwise—of the constitutionally-mandated three branches of federal government.}

\footnote{King makes many other prophetic references, especially to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but these references are made less directly through King’s use of slave spirituals.}
Davidic monarchy. These three exemplars demonstrate that the gift of prophecy is granted to many people of diverse backgrounds.

However, what is most striking about these prophets of the Golden Age (late 8th—late 6th century, BCE) is their common concern for proclaiming the word of God, for social justice, and for other core prophetic themes. They spoke for God the liberator of the Israelites from Egypt, God the giver of the covenant to Moses at Sinai. Events both external and internal to Israel were interpreted in light of God's active, interested presence. Confronting any and all perpetrators of religious idolatry, corruption, and social injustice, the prophets saw the connections between Israel's failure to honor the covenant traditions and her subsequent punishment. Rather than "predicting" the future, the prophets were merely discerning the signs of history within the context of understanding and proclaiming God's word, and subsequently judging a person's or a nation's obedience to that word. The prophets denounced all forms of socio-economic exploitation as affronts to God, announcing God's anger in the form of harsh judgments, interspersed with expressions of hope: for Israel's reaffirmation of the covenant, and for God's mercy.

Despite their bold, challenging postures to evil kings and corrupt elites, the prophets were not revolutionaries. They were reformers; they did not criticize systemic forms of injustice. The prophets did not advocate a nonviolent ethic of social protest, neither did they promote a grassroots sort of community organizing for

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7 The writing prophets we have inherited in the Hebrew canon were probably more confrontational and less beholden to established institutions than were the court/cult prophets. For example, Amos in his confrontation with Amaziah the priest makes a point of distinguishing himself from paid court prophets. Cf. Amos 7:14. Isaiah as an insider may have been an exception to this rule.

8 R.B.Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets*, (New York: Macmillan, 1968) p. 14. "The prophets were primarily preachers in the highest sense of that term, rather than teachers or prognosticators. The epigram which describes them as 'forth tellers rather than foretellers' makes a useful if not a completely accurate distinction."
resistance or change. The solution to all crises was not to sweep away an aging corrupt order, but to reaffirm something very old: God's covenant with Israel, and more generally speaking, our dependence on the living, present God. The prophets understood themselves to be heirs to and advocates of a rich, vital, and still viable tradition that began with the formative experiences of the Exodus and the Sinai covenant. For these reasons the prophets are aptly described as radical messengers with an essentially conservative message.9

The prophets did not come to King pure and unmediated. They were passed on to him—indeed, made compelling to him—via three major traditions, which are themselves intertwined and mutually affective: first, through the life and ministry of Jesus; second, through liberal Protestant (mostly white) theology and preaching; third, and most important, through African American church culture. Mediated or otherwise, the Hebrew prophets were directly available to King, not because he was a Baptist minister, not because he earned a Ph.D. in systematic theology. All he needed was a Bible.10

King's Sermons

In 1965, rather than departing radically from the past, King builds upon and intensifies his invocation of prophetic themes and
models seen very early in his career. First we will examine the 1955 “Holt Street Address” to observe this early usage, then consider two speeches from the later years: the 1965 “Address to the Synagogue Council,” and the 1968 “Address to the Ministers’ Leadership Training Conference.”

**Early Years: The Holt Street Address.** David Garrow identifies this first address to the bus boycotters (December 5, 1955) as one of the crucial windows into King’s work, demonstrating the profound influence of the southern Black church and the Bible on his life. It illustrates King’s invocation of the prophets at a critical moment in his ministry, the first of countless others. Its place as the first address of his career as a civil rights leader, as well as the spontaneity with which it was delivered, confer upon this speech a special prominence in the King canon.

King begins by defining both the community present that night and the purpose of the meeting. He appeals to his audience as Americans who love democracy, “determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its means.” People have gathered to correct the bus situation, both the immediate outrage of Rosa Parks’

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11 Of the 100 sermons and speeches read and/or listened to for this study—spanning his entire public career—King invokes the prophets in many ways throughout his ministry, but much more frequently during the years 1965-68.

12 Garrow, “The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries,” Union Seminary Quarterly Review, 40:4, 1986, p. 5. Garrow also notes the struggle in King scholarship to identify the major intellectual source and influence on his life. Recent King scholarship conducted by Lewis Baldwin, Kelvin Calloway, James Cone, David Garrow, Cornelius Gray, and Richard Lischer stresses this black church/Bible influence more than earlier studies of his life and thought. In this paper I have followed their compelling line of reasoning.

13 In his first book, Stride Toward Freedom (pp. 58-64), King directly comments on the lack of preparation time. (Earlier in the day King, the 26 year-old pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, had been selected to lead the newly-formed Montgomery Improvement Association and to address the meeting that evening.) Note the prophetic theme of divine calling and divine inspiration—as passed on via Black preachers—that King uses to explain the address’ success: “...I realized that this speech had evoked more response than any speech or sermon I had ever delivered, and yet it was virtually unprepared. I came to see for the first time what the older preachers meant then they said, ‘Open your mouth and God will speak for you.’” (p. 63).
arrest and the long history of intimidation, humiliation, and oppression experienced by African Americans on Montgomery's buses. Using a familiar rhetorical technique—later epitomized in his "I Have a Dream" speech—King introduces these themes with a crescendo-building repetition of "We are here because..." Five times in his six opening sentences he uses this formula, along with four other identity-forging "we are's," culminating with "We are here because we are determined to get the [bus] situation corrected." This technique is a mainstay of African American homiletics, preparing and inviting the congregation to participate in the "call and response" phase of the sermon or address, where energy and identity are exchanged and amplified between pulpit and pew.\(^\text{14}\)

Two other times in the address King uses such repetition, achieving ever greater responses from the audience. After detailing Parks' arrest and contrasting it with her upstanding character as responsible citizen and devoted Christian, King declares:

There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. [Thunderous applause] There comes a time my friends when people get tired of being flung across the abyss of humiliation...[Keep talking!] There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an Alpine November. [Applause]\(^\text{15}\)


\(^{15}\)Like many others in the King Center Archives, this speech is a transcription from a live recording, which also has the audience's response. Being able to listen to King's preaching is not just an added dimension of understanding, but a crucial part of true appreciation of the primacy of the spoken word. Cf. Lischer, pp. 171-172.
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After stressing the need for nonviolence and identifying the audience as triply special because of its adherence to Christianity, its experience of oppression as African Americans, and its location in America with her glorious tradition of protest, King invokes the concept of ethical action in its political and divine/universal dimensions:

And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, then the Supreme Court of this Nation is wrong. [Yes Sir! Applause] If we are wrong the Constitution of the United States is wrong. [Applause] If we are wrong God Almighty is wrong. [Cheers and applause] If we are wrong Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth. [Applause] If we are wrong justice is a lie.

Ending this last climax, King quotes Amos: “And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. [Applause]”

Only two-thirds completed, the address already raises several prophetic themes. First is the demand for social justice, for fair treatment on the buses of Montgomery. Second is the sense that the African Americans of Montgomery must actively pursue justice, not merely wait for the millennium. Third, is an evocation of covenant obedience paralleling the prophets’ evocations of the Sinai covenant. King asserts that those protesting will not be defying the Constitution, the inaugurating secular covenant of this nation which established principles of justice and conferred upon the American people a unique status and purpose: a chosen people with a special mission.

King, however, does more than raise prophetic themes in his message; he actually adopts the prophetic model of speech and action at the close of his address. In stressing the need for the salu-
tary, complementary effect of justice on love (implying that we often think of love as the only element of Christian faith) King reminds us that “justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which would work against love.” To reinforce this point, he adopts the voice of God in offering a judgment oracle:

God [is not] just standing out saying, “Behold thee, I love you Negro.” He’s also the God that standeth before the nations and says: “Be still and know that I am God, [Applause] that if you don’t obey me I’m gonna break the backbone of your power, and cast you out of the arms of your international and national relationships.”

The sense of direct calling by God, so essential to the prophetic model of ministry, is extended through King to the African American audience present. It is a call to Black Messianism that he reiterates at the end of his speech and to which he will return throughout his career. In this masterful first public address he makes references to Jesus and Christianity, but chooses to quote a fiery Hebrew prophet, to adopt the voice of a stern prophetic oracle, and to evoke several quintessential prophetic themes, chief among them the need for us to pursue justice actively as a form of obedience to God.

After the bus boycott was successfully completed in 1956—
and he had acquired national and international fame—King was never without an opportunity to speak. The prophetic themes expounded in the Holt Street address were recalled in various sermons and speeches during these early years (i.e., pre-1963, before Birmingham and the March on Washington). Though present in these early addresses, the prophetic references are not as frequent, nor as urgent as in the last three years.

**The Later Years: 1965-1968.** In contrast to his earlier triumphs, the last three years of King’s life are noted for his setbacks and his increasing radicalization in his thinking, speaking, and acting. The peak of his positive acclaim had already passed towards the end of 1965—after Birmingham, the March on Washington, the receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, and especially after the Selma voting rights march. He was expanding the area of his concern beyond racism, criticizing the government for its failure to address the intertwined evils of militarism and entrenched poverty which, along with racism, he was beginning to see as more deeply rooted in the psyche and structure of American society. Despite positive change regarding legalized racism,^19^ his expanded agenda and demands for more systemic change encountered stiffer resistance from those in political power.^20^ For his denunciation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, King experienced harsh criticism from other civil rights leaders who feared his outspokenness on such “peripheral” issues would damage their pursuit of racial justice here in America. At the

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^18^ In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” King directly identifies with the prophets who leave their villages to confront injustice with the word of God; in “I Have a Dream” King alludes to famous passages from Amos, Isaiah, and Daniel in his long crescendo finale. Cf. also, a 1957 address to the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations, stressing the prophetic role of the church, and a 1959 address at the fourth anniversary of the M.I.A., in which King upholds the Jews as a people—like the African American community—able to overcome prejudice and other obstacles to produce such great figures as Handel, Einstein, and the prophets. [emphasis added]


^20^ Most notably from Lyndon Johnson regarding Vietnam policy, and from Richard Daley, the mayor of Chicago, regarding open-housing protests in 1966.
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same time younger Black Power advocates were challenging his leadership and nonviolent philosophy, most notably during and after the Selma march. All of this was happening amidst a wave of massive urban rioting that began in Watts, Los Angeles, in the summer of 1965 and spread to other major urban centers over the next three summers. Not surprisingly, those same scholars noting King’s radicalization have also noted his weariness regarding the achievement of lasting peace and social justice.\(^\text{21}\) This is also a time when King’s invocation of the Hebrew prophets increases dramatically.\(^\text{22}\)

Address to the Synagogue Council. In a December 1965 address, King delivered the most extended discussion of Hebrew prophecy in his career. The speech is a watershed in his thought, of comparable significance to the Holt Street address, for it speaks to the extremism of the times, profoundly invoking the Hebrew prophets as vital, relevant models for current action—a truly bold statement heard nowhere before in King’s sermons or other writings.

\(^{21}\) Lischer, p. 181, and Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 602-604 (Garrow calls it depression induced partly by criticism and personal failures; contrast this position with the Christian optimism throughout King’s life stressed by Baldwin. There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 5-6, 339 and Spillers, pp. 96-99.

\(^{22}\) Though not asserted in a prepared address, in the summer of 1965 King explicitly described his ministry as prophetic. In two separate television interviews—one of which appeared before a national audience—King answered questions about his anti-Vietnam stand and his alleged uniting of peace and civil rights issues by claiming that ministers have a prophetic function: “...my expressions on the war in Vietnam grow out of something much larger than my participation in the Civil Rights movement. I happen to be a minister of the Gospel and I take that ministry very seriously, and in that capacity I have not merely a priestly function but a prophetic function, and I must ever seek to bring the great principles and insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage to bear on the social evils of our day...as a minister of the Gospel and one greatly concerned about the need for peace in our world and the survival of mankind, I must continue to take a stand on this issue.” Perhaps because he was being interviewed on television, in a non-religious context, King did not quote from the prophets directly. But the core themes of prophetic witness—of being called to speak out against social injustice, and to look into our ethical heritage for guiding principles—these are clearly articulated in the interviews, and to one of his widest possible audiences. “Interview on CBS-TV, Face the Nation,” 29 August 1965. King said virtually the same thing earlier in a local Los Angeles newscast on July 10, 1965.
The speech reflects much of what he was experiencing at the time: the radicalization of his thought, the expanding focus of his conscientious witness, and the mounting wave of criticism for his stance on Vietnam. At this time of personal and public turmoil, he looked "into history for the courage to speak even in an unpopular cause. Looming as ethical giants are those most extraordinary men of history, the Hebrew prophets."

King focuses on war and peace issues, specifically the escalating American involvement in Vietnam, and the "ugly repressive sentiment to silence peace-seekers" like himself. While warning us of the inexorable logic of war—including the possibility of nuclear holocaust—and of America's failure to pursue peace in good faith, he notes that "Free speech and the privilege of dissent and discussion are rights being shot down by bombers in Vietnam." After linking nuclear-era militarism with racism at home—"there is no point in fighting for integration of lunch counters if there can be no world in which to integrate"—King identifies himself as a minister of the gospel, "mandated by this calling...to seek peace among men and to do it even in the face of hysteria and scorn," to denounce moderates who see evil in the world yet say nothing, and to break silence "when a more terrible scourge afflicts the world." After creating an urgent mood, along with a sense of powerful, insidious evil, King the masterful preacher looks deep into our Judeo-Christian tradition for courageous forebears and finds the Hebrew prophets.

King discusses the prophets at the emotional, climactic core

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23 The occasion is King's acceptance of the Synagogue Council of America's Judaism and World Peace Award.

24 To defend his stance, King reminds us of the anti-war stances of certain national political leaders; he later recalls Abraham Lincoln, not for his Emancipation Proclamation, as King had done so many times before, but for his fearless denunciation of the Mexican War while a first-term congressman from Illinois.
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of his address, later using some of the momentum-building repetition we have heard before. Admiring their thundering voices of conscience, their articulate, passionate and fearless attacks on injustice and corruption—whether in kings or in their own unrepentant people—King declares that “today we particularly need the Hebrew prophets because they taught that to love God was to love justice: that each human being has an inescapable obligation to denounce evil where he sees it and to defy a ruler who commands him to break the covenant.” Here we have King’s understanding of Hebrew prophecy and its continuing vital relevance today. Just as importantly, we see his identification with the role of prophet: “Without physical protection, scornful of risks evoked by their unpopular messages, they went among the people with no shield other than truth.” These words acquire a special poignancy when the man uttering them has been stabbed, beaten, arrested, and threatened with death or bodily harm innumerable times for his own fearless truth-telling.

King ascends the staircase of emotional pitch by repeating the incantatory phrases, “We need the Hebrew prophets today because...” or “The Hebrew prophets are needed today because...” Among the chief reasons given: their courage to speak the truth will inspire decent people to do likewise; they will show us that living silently with a lie is a gross affront to God; and “the thunder of [prophetic] voices is the only sound stronger than the blasts of bombs and the clamor of war hysteria.” Again, we have a reiteration of three of the five core prophetic themes (the last two will appear shortly in the address). He describes himself as a minister of the gospel called to speak and act out the truth, which he equates with the word of God. Not only that, but he describes all human

25 But this is not a sermon to a familiar African American congregation—before whom he might comfortably employ those same homiletical techniques he used so well in Montgomery (and elsewhere). This unpublished speech has no indications of audience response, unlike the Holt St. address.
being as under an “inescapable obligation” to speak and act similarly—"to love God [is] to love justice.” One way of speaking truth, loving justice, and thereby loving God, is defying a ruler who commands us to break the covenant. In the context of this address that questions the legality and morality of our government’s actions in Vietnam, King is symbolically identifying the U.S. Constitution with the Sinai covenant, Lyndon Johnson with the corrupt ruler, and the courageous opposers of such rulers with the prophets. Furthermore, the passion for social justice is proposed as a sharp contrast to the entrenched racism here in the United States, and more specifically to the vicious conduct of our troops in this war.

The last two core themes—God’s present persistent demand for human action in this world, and a combination of hope- and doom-filled utterances—are more clearly articulated in the later section of the momentum-building repetition. After quoting his three favorite prophets in one paragraph, King identifies the Hebrew prophets as among us today, in the form of those ministers who preach the “prophets’ message of truth and decency, brotherhood and peace...[these prophets] are living in our time to give hope to a tortured world that their promise of the Kingdom of God has not been lost to mankind.” Again, he identifies the prophet with the minister, focusing on the central role preaching plays in both vocations. Despite the stern quotation from Isaiah, the physical presence of these ministers among us today is a sure, hopeful sign of God’s active presence in our lives, calling us “to undergo a mental and spiritual re-evaluation, a change of focus which will...generate the readiness, indeed the eagerness, to enter into the new world which is now possible, ‘the city which hath foundation, whose builder and maker is God.’”

26 It is plausible to suggest that King saw himself in the prophetic tradition of Nathan confronting David regarding Uriah, or Elijah confronting Ahab regarding Naboth.
27 Amos (“Let justice roll...”), Micah (“they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks...” 4:3, also Isaiah 2:4) and Isaiah (“When ye make many prayers, I will not hear; Your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean...” 1:15-16).
Some observers may dismiss this speech as flattery aimed at a specific Jewish religious group in New York City. Yet, as we have seen, King looked to the Hebrew prophets as early as 1955, long before this 1965 speech. He had invoked the authority of prophetic witness as recently as the previous summer, before a national television audience. He would be looking to the prophets with increasing urgency afterwards, up to his death in 1968.28

Address to the Ministers' Leadership Training Conference. The last few months of King's life were consumed with a proposed Poor People's Campaign—his boldest, most radical form of nonviolent direct action—scheduled to culminate in Washington, DC, during the spring of 1968. His efforts on behalf of this campaign—to address systemic economic inequality—are reflected in his sermons and speeches throughout the period. He relies on the prophets to convey a sense of urgency by providing familiar passages of impending judgment (and inspiring hope).29 They also provide the most effective models of thought, speech, and action for both the rank and file of this campaign and the clergy who make up the leadership, including King.

More than any other speech of his career, King's "Address to the Ministers Leadership Training Conference" (February 23, 1968) forcefully presents Hebrew prophecy as an action-based model for present-day ministry. His discussion of the prophets and

28 For the television interview(s), cf. note 22, above. For especially relevant sermons on core prophetic themes during these later years, cf. from 1966: "Guidelines for a Constructive Church" and "Prodigal Son;" from 1967: "Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam" and "To Serve the Present Age;" and from 1968: "Address to the Mass Meeting [Birmingham]."

29 To add to the sense of urgency, consider that in 1967—during the summer before the Poor People's Campaign—the most destructive riots to date erupted in Newark, Detroit, and many other cities. In Detroit alone, six days of rioting resulted in 43 deaths, over 1000 wounded, and thousands of arrests. That summer violence prompted President Johnson to create a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Cf. Harvard Sitkoff, The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980, pp. 200-204.
their fusion of challenging speech with challenging action is on a par with his 1965 speech to the Synagogue Council, but with an added emotional pitch. This increased zeal is perhaps not surprising, considering the situation, a conference mobilizing support for the truly ambitious Poor People’s Campaign, and the audience—mostly African American pastors and other committed activists with whom he could engage more comfortably in the emotional rhythms of African American preaching.

King’s title for his remarks, “To Minister to the Valley,” uses a familiar prophetic image—epitomized in Isaiah 40—which he contrasts early on with the mountain imagery first seen in the Bible with Moses at Sinai. “...[This conference] has been a mountaintop experience. And there are those transfiguring moments in life when we do ascend the mountaintop where we are inspired, where we are lifted, and where we feel a sense of eternity.” But there is a temptation, he warns, to stay on the mountaintop and forget the despair of those remaining in the valley. “And the valley calls us. We will be returning to valleys filled with men and women who know the ache and anguish of poverty.”

He challenges these leaders of the church to minister to this valley made bleak and desolate by the evils of racism, militarism and, most especially for this campaign, economic exploitation. He challenges his audience to harness and direct the angry frustration of the poor and the youth in America by making the church relevant, i.e., prophetic, in its concern for social justice, and revolutionary in its ability to challenge the status quo.

We can make the church recapture its authentic ring.
We have the power to change America, and give a kind of new vitality to the religion of Jesus Christ. And we

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30Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 598-599. Garrow also mentions that King offered some very pointed, despondent opening remarks to the conference on 19 February: “A kind of genocide has been perpetrated against the black people,...Not physical genocide, but psychological and spiritual genocide,...” (Ibid., p. 598)
of new vitality to the religion of Jesus Christ. And we can get those young men and women...who've lost faith in the church to see that Jesus was a serious man precisely because he dealt with the tang of the human amid the glow of the divine, and that he was concerned about their problems. He was concerned about bread...[He was] the greatest revolutionary that history has ever known.

Not Karl Marx but Jesus is King's authentic revolutionary, and to reinforce this point he recalls Jesus' quotation of Isaiah, “He was anointed to heal the broken-hearted...to deal with the problems of the poor,” etc.

King brings up the theme of America's failure to obey its sacred covenantal obligations, once again linking the principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence with earlier understandings of basic human rights as God-given. And in this speech he forcefully questions the ability of Black America to celebrate the upcoming Bicentennial. “What life have we known? Too often it's a life of unemployment, of under-employment, of misery and poverty. What liberty have we known? Too often it is merely the liberty to move from one slum to another.”

The Poor People's Campaign will allow a creative, nonviolent expression of this misery and anger, with the ultimate goal of forcing the federal government to do something. “They [Congress and the President] aren't going to do a single thing until we act,

31Smith, p. 280.
32King's criticism of American society, though deep, did not cut so deep as Thurgood Marshall's comments on the Constitution's slavery compromises in his 1987 Ebony article, "The Real Meaning of the Constitution's Bicentennial." Consider this brief passage: "I do not believe that the meaning of the Constitution was forever "fixed" at Philadelphia. Nor do I find the wisdom, foresight, and sense of justice exhibited by the Framers particularly profound. To the contrary, the government they devised was defective from the start,..." (p. 64) He also points out the irony of the Declaration's truth that "all men are created equal" being written by a slaveowner in the midst of a slave-owning society.
until we act massively, until we create a nonviolent crisis in this nation." King then invokes the empowering imagery of Exodus by declaring that the opening of this campaign "would be the first wave. But you see, you don't deal with pharaoh’s hardened heart with just one plague. You got to keep plaguing pharaoh. And we want waves and waves.”

In this scheme President Johnson is cast in the role of Pharaoh, and as the leader of this challenging campaign, King implies a connection between himself and Moses.33

Interestingly, after the Exodus imagery, yet still in the heat of sermonizing for this protest campaign, King draws back from a more radical posture and qualifies his remarks.

...[W]e aren't going to close down the Pentagon...We aren't going there to close down Capitol Hill...But if they don't respond to us,...we can do a lot of other things to escalate it. We can get three or four trucks moving through the ghettos of our nation, picking up uncollected garbage, and take it and pour it right down [on] Capitol Hill.

As the enlister of mass support, King is perhaps calming those who flinch at the extreme action of occupying offices, especially the military's headquarters. He also highlights the symbolic action of garbage dumping as an alternative to the more revolutionary (and potentially more violence-provoking) tactic of "closing down" the government. His position is consistent with the general position of the Hebrew prophets: they accused Israel's rulers of covenant infidelity and pronounced doom-filled judgment, presenting themselves in fearless witness to their understanding of God's call. They engaged in symbolic action to dramatize the urgency of

33The Moses-King link was one other observers had made on numerous occasions but which King himself was reluctant to make. Cf. Baldwin, There is a Balm in Gilead, pp. 246-249.
whatever crisis the nation was confronting (e.g., Jeremiah’s yoke). But they did not themselves wield the sword that would kill an unjust king, nor did they lead popular uprisings (violent or otherwise) to replace the institution of kingship with another form of government.

Several other prophetic themes heard earlier in King sermons are again brought up: the sense of America as a chosen nation, with great potential and thus great expectations; the harsh judgment of God when those expectations are unfulfilled or willfully ignored (“Congress sees the problem [of poverty] every day. But they won’t face it. And I hate to say it. But this Congress, if it does not come to itself, is going to hell”);\(^{34}\) the need for the church and its membership to be actively engaged in the struggle to bring the Kingdom of God to the present; and the presence of hope, seen in the belief that the protesters are obeying God’s will.

But in asking these ministers to choose the path of open protest King offers as an inspirational model the Hebrew prophets, and the continuation of their prophetic spirit in the actions of Jesus and his early followers. The following crescendo from the speech is worth quoting at length because it contains all five of the core prophetic themes outlined above and a mixture of famous prophetic passages interspersed with present day problems, thus achieving a conflation of current historic time with transhistoric Biblical time.

[We] are not only priests, but we are prophets. When God speaks, who can but prophesy? We are prophets and if we are going to have a creative ministry, we must have a prophetic ministry. And I would urge you today...to go out and prophesy. Prophesy until slums and rat-infested

\(^{34}\)Note the phrasing “come to itself,” suggesting redeemable qualities at the heart of this otherwise unresponsive Congress. Despite the harsh tone of the judgment, King has not given up entirely on America’s government, nor on its ability to change through nonviolent pressure—not to the extent that Black Nationalists have given up.
hettoes will be a thing of a dead past...Go out and prophesy, until the idle industries of Appalachia are revitalized and the wrinkled stomachs in Mississippi are filled...Go out and prophesy, until our state houses and our city halls will be filled with men who will do justly, who will love mercy, and will walk humbly with their God. Go out and prophesy, until even the lion and the lamb can lie down together, and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall be afraid. It won’t always be easy ...But if we are followers of Jesus Christ, we know that Christianity is not a euphoria of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease....It means taking up the cross....with all of its tension-packed agony and bearing that cross until it leaves the very marks of Jesus Christ on your body, and on your soul....[W]e’re going back to a valley that’s filled with despair ....And we have the job of transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.

This address is easily King’s most profound evocation of the prophetic model of ministry, coming about six weeks before his death.35

The three sermons examined in depth for this survey best represent King’s understanding and use of prophetic models for thinking, speaking, and acting. His increasing radicalization between 1965 and 1968 is reflected in his increasing reliance on the prophetic model during those years. Of the approximately 100 sermons examined for this essay, forty of them were taken from the

35King employs the prophetic model with equal if not more intensity in his last address, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” (also known as “I See the Promised Land”). With this famous speech, quite easily available on tape, one can experience more fully King’s emotional crescendos, and the audience’s reflection and amplification of his energy.
years 1955-1964, the remaining sixty from 1965 onward. Though prophetic themes could be discerned in all time periods, the reliance in the last three years on prophetic quotations and prophetic models for speaking and acting increase both quantitatively and qualitatively. Before speculating further on why King embraced prophetic models, we should consider briefly the three traditions which made the Hebrew prophets so appealing to King in the first place.

Three Traditions Mediating Hebrew Prophecy

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a minister of the gospel and believed in Jesus as the Messiah. He reminds his audiences time and again of his calling as a Baptist minister, making Jesus and the gospels the focus of his sermons. But it is important to note that he concentrated on the prophetic elements in Jesus' life, and furthermore Jesus himself was aware of the prophetic tradition with which he himself identified.

The inaugurating act of Jesus' public ministry was a symbolic identification with the spirit of Hebrew prophecy: baptism in the Jordan with the prophet-like John the Baptist. King focused on Jesus' quotation of Isaiah regarding the preaching of the gospel to the poor, liberation of the oppressed, etc. Jesus' teachings, healings, and confrontations with established powers are the subjects of King's sermons, i.e., those features consistent with the prophetic

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36 The overwhelming majority of materials consulted for this paper is housed in the largest repository of King materials in the world: the Archives of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. As an indicator of the weighting of later materials, consider their index of “Speeches, Sermons, Articles, Statements: 1954-1968.” Of the 925 items listed, 491 come from the years before 1965, whereas 420 are dated 1965 or later. (14 items without dates are listed at the end of the index, thereby bringing the total to 925.)

37 The retelling of this event in all four gospels certainly adds to its significance in Jesus' life. Moreover, Albert Nolan in Jesus Before Christianity (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), emphasizes this event precisely as a self-conscious identification with the prophetic heritage. Cf. p.11, Ch. 2 passim.

themes of ethical obedience, social justice, and human efforts to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The high christology of Jesus as the eternal logos, the final judge, is not nearly so important to him as the low christology of Jesus, the living human being, the teacher and comforter of the oppressed, the nonviolent opposer of injustice and embodiment of the ethic of love.

This human side of Jesus is the single most important feature of Christianity stressed by liberal Protestantism, resonating well with the prophetic emphasis on God's active presence in the human situation. King found renewed meaning and purpose in organized religion as a result of his exposure to various strands of liberal Protestantism, especially its emphasis on reconciling scriptural revelation with modern science.

The Social Gospel and Personalism are perhaps the strands of liberal Protestantism most pertinent to King's understanding of the prophets. Walter Rauschenbusch directly invokes the prophetic tradition of Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Jesus, as a grounding for his theology of human endeavor to build the Kingdom of God on earth. Personalism's conception of God as an active, personal

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39 As King reminded us so often, "It's alright to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here." This quotation, representative of perhaps hundreds more in the King canon, is from his last public address, "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (also known as "I See the Promised Land"). Cf. A Testament of Hope, p. 280.

40 The historical critical method of biblical inquiry emerged from this attempt to reconcile revelation and rationalism. In his "Autobiography of Religious Development," King describes himself as skeptical by nature, questioning in his early adolescence the bodily resurrection of Jesus, later in college feeling liberated from an uncritical fundamentalism, allowing him to embrace the more quintessentially liberal view of the Bible as possessing profound truths behind the myths. Although autobiographical statements are perhaps more authentic sources of knowledge about King, they, too, are not accepted uncritically. Keith Miller, for example, questions the accuracy of King's characterization of his father's religious views as "fundamentalist," and further questions the absence of any references to the African American church in another famous autobiographical piece, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." Cf. Voice of Deliverance, Chs. 2 & 3, passim, and Cone's "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Black Theology and the Black Church," The Drew Gateway, Winter 1985, 56:2, pp. 2-3.

deity—coupled with the dignity and worth of all human personality—resonated well with the Hebrew prophets' conception of God as an interested but stern and demanding father figure to his children.  

Recent King scholarship has also revealed the profound influence of the liberal homiletic tradition on his oratory, as epitomized by Harry Emerson Fosdick and Robert McCracken, popular pastors and radio preachers of New York's Riverside Church. King used a great deal of material from these ministers in his own sermons, including passages on social action, pacifism, nonviolence, and nonconformity. This scholarship stresses the impact of the "lower" homiletic tradition on him more than the "higher" theological and philosophical traditions stressed by earlier King scholars and King himself. In both cases, a liberal outlook toward the Bible, toward religion in general, and toward current social problems predominates.

Clearly, however, the most important avenue for King's appropriation of the Hebrew prophets is the African American church, the community that nurtured him and his family for generations. In assessing this community's role in making Hebrew prophecy amenable to King, we should consider two major aspects of African American church culture: its unique biblical interpretation and the powerful models of prophetic ministry it provided, seen especially in King's own family heritage.

42 King was impressed enough by this school of theology to pursue doctoral work at Boston U. under its major thinkers, L. Harold DeWolf and Edgar S. Brightman. King credits Rauschenbusch, Brightman and DeWolf as major influences on his thinking in his "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," incorporated into Stride Toward Freedom as Ch. 6.

43 Keith Miller, Voice of Deliverance, Ch. 3 & 4, passim, and pp. 200-201.

44 Besides Miller—who stresses King's successful combination of the homiletic traditions of white liberalism and the African American folk pulpit—Lewis Baldwin focuses on King's African American, southern, folk cultural roots. Miller's focus on homiletics and Baldwin's emphasis on folk culture are complementary angles of approach to King scholarship. Earlier treatments of King—e.g., Smith and Zepp's—have accepted uncritically the bias toward theology and philosophy as practiced in the academy. King himself may have learned through his academic training to devalue the insights of folk pulpit wisdom or African American theology (the very concept of a theologizing unique to African Americans—or theologizing as an endeavor open to all—is at best embryonic in King's thinking).
The experience of enslavement, exile, oppression, and endurance that has characterized the African American’s time on this continent has enabled the African American church community to see the story of the Israelites’ liberation as fundamentally their own, second only to the Jews’ identification with this story. The Exodus and Moses traditions are thus paradigmatic for all subsequent African American biblical interpretation. The centrality of this liberating event to later interpreters, including the canonical prophets, cannot be overstated. “Deliverance from oppression was the event through which the later Israelite inevitably viewed his understanding of himself, God, and his people.” As the prophets looked back to the saving act of God in the Exodus and saw a paramount concern for deliverance from oppression, so later African American interpreters—especially Martin Luther King, Jr.—looked to the same story, and to those prophetic champions of “God’s concern for a poor/oppressed people.”

This story of a liberating God concerned with human suffering has been transmitted most notably in the African American community by the central character of the charismatic, prophetic preacher. King well understood this model of ministry and preaching, especially its prophetic dimensions. His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather participated in a tradition that had its roots in slave-era folk preachers who, denied any formal education, nonetheless preached an emotional experience of God’s word, passing on the liberating stories of the Bible, leading resistance to the

45 This is a common thesis advanced by students of African American culture. For some recent examples of this kind of scholarship, cf. the articles in Cain Hope Felder, ed., Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
47 Ibid., pp. 31-32.
48 Cf. Lewis Baldwin, There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), Ch. 5.
enslaving culture, and providing hope to the slave community.  

King and his preaching ancestors were also significantly molded by the experience of higher education in the African American tradition at Morehouse College. He was nurtured during his Morehouse days by Benjamin Mays and George Kelsey, scholars who embodied a creative synthesis of African American folk wisdom and advanced liberal theological knowledge, as well as a tradition of scholarly and practical concern for racial and social justice.  

In addition to the example set by his father, Mays, and Kelsey, King also experienced a powerful, charismatic, and learned model of preaching in Vernon Johns, his immediate predecessor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. What these representative personalities illustrate is the rich tradition of social activism and social protest emanating from the African American pulpit that King inherited as the son, grandson, and great-grandson of Baptist preachers. Coupled with the biblical paradigm of liberation from oppression as epitomized in the Exodus and Moses traditions, the African American church was especially receptive to the core prophetic themes we have seen King enliven and carry on in his own masterful sermonizing.

49In his "Autobiography of Religious Development" King sees his father as a great motivating factor in his adoption of ministry as a profession (p. 13 ff). My information regarding slave-era folk preaching comes from a conversation with Dr. Major J. Jones, Chaplain at the Atlanta University Center Library, on 9 Jan. 1992 and from John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 61-76. Blassingame also discusses at length the profound influence of the spiritual as a form of instruction, hope, and group identity. King quoted widely from the spirituals, often ending his sermons with rhythmic passages from them. To the extent that spirituals also passed on the biblical heritage to the African American community, they, too, are sources for King's appropriation of the prophets.

50Lawrence E. Carter, Sr., Dean of the Martin Luther King, Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse, describes King as having walked by many prophetic figures before him while studying at this "prophetic incubator," which was founded by men who consciously chose "to identify with the oppressed and to affirm the personhood of blacks." Conversation with Dean Carter, 7 Jan. 1992.

51Miller in Voice of Deliverance succinctly describes Johns as a "Learned black preacher whose eccentric personality strongly resembled that of an Old Testament prophet." (p. 200).
Conclusion

The three traditions outlined above made Hebrew prophecy a relevant model for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and ministry, but they do not fully explain his stronger embrace of the model during the years 1965-68, which is the central thesis of this essay. Circumstances that he created through his own fearless truth-telling made him adopt more fully the prophetic model, and made the core prophetic themes truly resonate in his oratory. Principally it was his denunciation of American involvement in Vietnam and his expansion of the Civil Rights movement to address economic issues throughout the entire country that drew greater criticism from previous allies in the struggle for racial justice. The successes of the Civil Rights movement in the South also produced a younger, more volatile generation of student leaders that criticized and isolated King. As he said so often in these later years, the Hebrew prophets were sources of strength that he sought to emulate—and encouraged others to emulate. The Hebrew prophets, the three traditions, and King's own life experiences together form the hermeneutical circle of recovery, itself a model of interpretation that does not point to any one locus as a paramount influence. His stronger identification with the spirit of Hebrew prophecy radicalized his thought and action, yet this radicalization made an increased reliance on Hebrew prophecy that much easier. Both observations are correct, neither one excludes or contradicts the other.

King's last years epitomized the fullest definition of "radicalization": not merely extreme political action (often associated with violent revolution), but also "getting at the roots." He certainly got at the roots of racism, materialism, and militarism in American society, and perhaps in the world. He saw that the roots of these modern social ills were truly deep and intertwined. In this

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52 Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead*, pp. 326-330. Baldwin discusses at length the parallels between the social context of the classical prophets and America during the late King years.
sense he did move to a more radical criticism, and commensurately more radical (though not violent) action, as seen in the Poor People's Campaign and in the many antiwar rallies he joined.\textsuperscript{53} But he also saw deep in the roots of American democracy, and more deeply in our Judeo-Christian ethical heritage—chiefly through the prophetic strands in both testaments—principles of justice (and love) on which to establish a more perfect union, as well as the Kingdom of God. Though he may have felt discouraged at times during these last years, he did not lose faith in the possibility of transfiguration through a revival of prophetic themes, nor did he lose faith in Jesus’ nonviolent ethic of love. The prophets were of a similar mind with regard to the revival of covenantal obedience. When “radicalization” is understood in its fullest sense, there is perhaps less contradiction in juxtaposing the radical extremism of the prophets’ and King’s style with the essentially conservative, revivalist messages they were bearing.

Apart from his many gifts—of thinking, of speaking, of commitment, of compassion—what ultimately distinguishes King from other African American civil rights leaders of his time is his religiosity, specifically his whole-hearted adoption of the Judeo-Christian prophetic model of ministry. To those more politically and tactically conservative than King—Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the Urban League—King’s prophetic, confrontational truth-telling about Vietnam was too radical, too extreme. To those more radical in their actions and their critiques of American society—Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam, or Stokely Carmichael and James Forman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—King’s prophetic adherence

\textsuperscript{53}To say that he was less radical than others because he did not advocate violence is to distort the meaning of “radical.” Nonviolence is a far more radical approach to addressing social problems than is violence. Perhaps the measure of radical devotion to any particular cause should not be willingness to commit violence but rather, willingness to persevere, and to endure violence and not strike back.
to covenantal traditions of American democracy, as well as his identification with what Malcolm X described as an oppressor’s religion, must have made these Black Power advocates squirm with impatience.\(^5^4\) For King, Hebrew prophecy set the standard, reinforced by Jesus’ ministry, liberal Protestantism, and African American church culture.

Many people have applied the prophet label to King, mostly after he was assassinated.\(^5^5\) For anyone remotely acquainted with King and the prophetic tradition there is an intuitive association of the two. Benjamin Mays spoke to this intuition in his eulogy for King in April 1968:

If Amos and Micah were prophets in the eighth century, B.C., Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prophet in the twentieth century. If Isaiah was called of God to prophesy in his day, Martin Luther was called of God to prophesy in his time...If a prophet is one who interprets in clear and intelligible language the will of God, Martin Luther King, Jr., fits that designation. If a prophet is one who does not seek popular causes to espouse, but rather the causes he thinks are right, Martin Luther qualified on that score.

\(^5^4\)This perception of King as the so-called moderate “Uncle Tom” is present in both the larger White and African American communities. Cf. David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 625.

\(^5^5\)One need only consider several sources to sample the truth of this assertion: Kelvin Calloway’s unpublished D. Min. Dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, Martin Luther King, Jr.: Modern-Day Prophet..., or William Ramsay’s Four Modern Prophets: Rauschenbusch, King, Gutierrez, and Reuther (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), or Baldwin’s “The Minister as Preacher, Pastor, and Prophet: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.” American Baptist Quarterly. The one exception to the prophetic bandwagon: Joseph M. Thompson’s Ph. D. dissertation, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Christian Witness: An Interpretation of King Based on a Theological Model of Prophetic Witness, Fordam University, 1981.
King was clearly more prophetic than priestly or pastoral. He may have excelled in those latter functions, but without his adoption of the prophetic model we would scarcely now be remembering him with a national holiday. He was, first of all, more a preacher and activist than an academic, systematic theologian, or author of books. He shares this identity with the Hebrew prophets.

In moments of great stress we often say that true character is revealed. Certainly King was under stress constantly from the bus boycott until his death thirteen years later. The greater stress of his last three years—produced by his numerous awards as well as increased notoriety—surely produced a response as authentic as any other time in his life, a response different in some ways, but an authentic one. James Cone has written: "Where one turns when one's back is up against the wall and when everything seems hopeless will tell us far more about our theology than what is often printed in articles and books...when despair was about to destroy the possibility of making a new future for the poor, King turned to the faith contained in the tradition of the Black church." 56 In those latter, stressful days of King's life we also hear more of the Hebrew prophets.

56James Cone, “Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology, and the Black Church,” p. 4.
The Religious Quest, or The Quest for Home, As Portrayed By Contemporary African American Women Writers

Black theologians in the past twenty or twenty-five years have demonstrated that African Americans have not traditionally been a part of the Western theological enterprise and, therefore, have not participated, until recently, in the construction of modern theology, or generally been involved in mainstream theological discourse. Nevertheless, within the past two to three decades much work has been done in the academic world to discover, capture, and build on the theological bases that have undergirded African American religious development over the past three hundred years. The Black theology movement, begun in 1969 with the publication of James Hal Cone’s pathfinding Black Theology and Black Power, has grown to dynamic proportions over the years and has generated national and even international attention. In making its case, this way of doing theology has interacted with major Western theological personalities, theologians of the so-called Third World, and both feminist and womanist theological proponents in the United States.

Diligent research in several sources of Black life and history in this country has yielded rich resources for the study and under-

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standing of the Black theological tradition. Slave religion, slave
narratives, Black spirituals, blues, slave revolts, the Underground
Railroad, Black religious leaders, Black worship, the Black preacher,
Black literature, and many other components of the tradition of the
Black Church, as well as other sources in African American society,
are found to contain a wealth of revealing materials from which to
draw an understanding of the theological insights and perceptions
of the African American people.

Not enough examination, however, has been done in the
field of Black literature to discern its surprising fund of theological
insight. Black womanist theological scholars and writers such as
Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, Katie Cannon, and some femi-
nist scholars, such as Carol Christ, have tapped into the rich mine
of literature for the study of the spiritual insights of women, but
this work has been largely neglected in theological seminaries.

For a number of years I have been looking closely at the
contemporary works of Black women writers as a source for under-
standing human liberation from the perspective of the Black
woman. I have found much theological material and significant
religious viewpoints reflected in the lives and works of Black women
literary artists.

A case in point is Margaret Walker, poet and novelist, who
has been on the American literary scene much longer than any of
the other writers I have examined. Had Margaret Walker been a
man, she possibly would have followed in her father's footsteps and
entered the ministry or some other religious vocation. Her father
and mother, being respectively a minister and a music teacher, pro-
vided abundant reading materials in their home library to feed
young Margaret's intellect and her literary imagination. Notable
among these books were the Bible and Shakespeare. Included also

were the Harlem Renaissance poets.\textsuperscript{4} As both a poet and an intellectual, Walker exhibits a deep concern for humanity that has strong theological implications. Although she refers to what she calls her “philosophy” as humanism, she admits that this influence stems from her religious background. She writes: “I grew up in the Judeo-Christian heritage with a minister for a father. My early years were largely influenced by this Christian philosophy. I have never completely gotten away from that.”\textsuperscript{5}

The philosophy that has been with Margaret Walker through all her adult years and has guided her academic and literary career (for example, in writing her poem “For My People,” or her celebrated novel \textit{Jubilee}) she describes as humanism.\textsuperscript{6} Since, in her own mind, she considered herself a Christian humanist and even later, changing to call herself an “academic humanist” after reading much materialistic philosophy, interestingly enough, she never became a materialist. Although her concept of humanism has broadened over the years and, owing to the Church’s inability to deal with institutional racism, she now rejects the idea of Christian humanism, one see in Walker’s description of her views a philosophy strongly tinged with liberation theology, or what I have dubbed “human liberation theology.” This “humanism” she sees today as the only system of belief that will save our society from crumbling.

Even the highest peaks of religious understanding must come in a humanistic understanding—the appreciation of every human being for his [her] own


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., p. 11.

spiritual way. I think of this in my own respect because I believe that [humankind] is only one race—the human race. There are many strands in the family of [humans]—many races. The world has yet to learn to appreciate the deep reservoirs of humanism in all races.\(^7\)

Clearly Walker does not have in mind here classical humanism with its emphasis on the humanities, the literature, culture, and advancement of human achievements in the purely secular realm. What she means is humanitarianism, that is, the recognition and assertion of the dignity and worth of all human beings. She has in mind the valuation of persons regardless of race, sex, creed, class, or national origin. What she is pointing to is charged with spiritual connotations and is fully realizable only in a religious context. Were Margaret Walker, in fact, a theologian, she would be teaching and writing a human liberation theology that would embrace the entire human family, or in her own terminology, the “family of man.”

It was possible to observe this tendency in Walker even as early as her poem “For My People.” This poem is full of religious and theological imagery. Certainly there is in Walker and her works a search for authentic spiritual meaning.

One of the religious themes I see explored or implied in African American women writers in the second half of the 20th century is the religious quest.\(^8\) In this essay it is my intention to examine the nature of this religious quest as displayed by Black women writers.

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\(^7\) Powell, p. 12.

\(^8\) Other scholars were observing this tendency in women writers in general at the same time that I discerned it. In fact, Carol Christ came out with her book, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* at the same time that I was investigating the same theme among African American women writers.
In some cases this quest can be recognized in the lives of the writers themselves as well as in the lives of the characters they create. It may be a quest for God, a quest for authentic self-realization, a quest for meaning in life, or a search for cultural roots. Because of the unique nature of their particular situations in American society, the quest takes on a different character among males and females, respectively. Though both are affected in their striving by the conditions of race and sex, poverty and disadvantage in America, their quests reveal somewhat different interests and orientations.

I will limit this discussion to Margaret Walker, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, but will include also a few insights from the work of Maya Angelou and Terry McMillan. Claude Brown, W.E.B. DuBois, and Howard Thurman provide some sociological, philosophical, and theological framework within which to view these religious quests. One of the most predominant characteristics of the quest is the search for what may be termed “home” or rootedness. Claude Brown clarifies the tendency of uprootedness that is typical of the African American experience in general. Aside from having been uprooted from their native land of Africa during the Atlantic slave trade era and experiencing a situation of geographical displacement and psychological instability as slaves in America, these people underwent another major shift of place a few decades after slavery had officially come to an end in this country. Claude Brown depicts the consequences of this new experience of being uprooted in his novel. By delving into his own personal life he shows the devastating effects of the mass exodus of Black people, fleeing dehumanizing conditions in the South, and their migration into Northern cities where they encountered equally distressing conditions of a different cast.

Brown’s theme is the experience of a misplaced generation

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of Southerners from North and South Carolina who fled to New York City to escape the poverty, discrimination, and the harsh realities of the South. New York had been described to them as a dream land, a Promised Land, "flowing with milk and honey." Brown records the story of "their searching, their dreams, their sorrow" and their struggle to establish themselves in the promised paradise. What they found, however, was life far different from what had been described to them: conditions of squalor, poverty, unemployment, disrupted family and cultural life, loss of a sense of home, values, and centeredness. Of course, Brown described the poorest of these migrants, those who wound up in the vicious cycle of criminal living. All were not of this variety. Those who were of a different class achieved a higher level of existence. But the basic problem of being uprooted and having to struggle to establish new roots and a new identity was common to all.

The masses found a slum ghetto and a tremendously different lifestyle than they knew in the South. Too many people full of hatred and bitterness were crowded into a dirty, smelly, "uncared-for closet section of a great city." The mamas broke their backs and knees scrubbing floors. The children were disillusioned, disappointed, angry, and miserable. They had little hope of deliverance. Brown asks the question: "For where does one run when he's already in the promised land?" Where they came from was home, but they couldn't go back, or so they thought. They had to make the best of this new place. Most of those who remained in the South suffered enormous hardships and indignities, but retained the hard-won sense of home.

Margaret Walker, Southern-reared and well-grounded, represents the culturally-rooted Black woman of the South. In her poem "For My People" she depicts the overall conditions and roots of Black people, both North and South. The poem reflects a total

10 Brown, Manchild, pp. vii-viii.
sense of peoplehood, togetherness, identity, common heritage, common hope, and rootedness. Covering the whole spectrum of these sensibilities, the poem draws together the experiences of North, South, East, and West.

The interplay of the themes of rootedness in the rural South and uprootedness in the urban North and South are evident in Walker's poem. Her focus moves from “playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama backyards” through bitter years of inferior schooling, to adult years mixed with joys and hardship of the South (though still with a sense of family and togetherness: “to laugh and dance and sing and play and drink their wine and religion and success, to marry their playmates and bear children and then die of consumption and anemia and lynching”). The sixth stanza then shifts to an uprooted urban existence, mostly Northern: the “lost disinherited, dispossessed and happy people filling the cabarets and taverns and other people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and land and money and something—something all our own.”

Interestingly the poem does not condemn either group, nor does it create a sense of despair. Rather it moves forward in rhythmic cadence toward a spirit of optimism and a determination and courage to rise.

The character Sula, in Toni Morrison's novel, represents the uprooted, the homeless. Sula’s quest is for both sense of place and a sense of authentic personhood. She is highly affected by society’s expectations of her, which she totally rejects in her quest, and her journey toward self-realization becomes a spiritual one. She is artistic and creative, but thwarted by her environment. Living in the small Ohio town of Medallion, Sula is at least two or three generations removed from the South and shaped by an environment that is absent of love. Her father died when she was three, and her mother burned to death while Sula was yet a child. Raised in the

home of her grandmother, Eva Peace, Sula lived a phantom-like existence which seemingly leaves her mostly without feelings and with a desire to be wicked. Even as a child she watched with peculiar pleasure as her mother, Hannah, burned to death. And she accidentally drowned one of her little boy playmates as her best friend, Nel, watched. Her love for wickedness manifests itself in her indulgence in sex in later life, which she did for the benefit of the misery, sorrow, and wickedness she imagined herself to be creating thereby.

Despite the negative, antiheroic traits in her hero, Morrison has in Sula a superbly fascinating artistic creation. An outcast. An alienated, rebellious, wanderer, Sula is a mystical, spiritually haunting figure. Obviously a creation of her environment, she lacks many of the qualities one would expect in a normal human existence, such as love and sympathy. Perhaps the author deliberately refuses to make her a whole person because the environment that produced her lacks wholesomeness. Yet her character and reactions to her environment, though individualistic, are thoroughly human.

The theme of rootlessness, of a lack of sound cultural grounding, is especially apparent in the personality of Sula, as well as in the community of Medallion in which she lives. The people of Medallion were without a religion or any other strong social force that could enable them to deal wholesomely with the problems created by Sula and the other Peace women, who lay freely with the husbands of the town and in other respects were loose with their morals. In the face of these strong assertive women, the community permitted superstitions to take over.

The people of Medallion conjured up images of Sula as an evil spirit upon her mysterious disappearance and return after ten years, marked by a "plague of robins". She was "laying" all the Black women's husbands, and some white men as well. They had all sorts of signs of her evilness. "Mr. Finley sat on his porch sucking chicken bones, as he had done for thirteen years, looked up, saw Sula,
choked on a bone and died on the spot." Other signs were that except for her funny-shaped finger and evil birthmark she had lost no teeth and had no bruises or scratches, although she had played rough as a child.

Pictured in images of loneliness and solitude, Sula is not simply a "loose" woman. She is embarked on a search for something. Part of her ten year absence was spent in college in Nashville. Perhaps she sought her roots in the South. Morrison suggests that in bed with men was "the only place she could find what she was looking for: misery and an ability to feel deep sorrow." Yet, she found no complete satisfaction for what appears to be a spiritual yearning. In her travels she had been to Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, San Diego (North, South, East, and West); she met and had affairs with many men who eventually bored her with a terrible sameness: "the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, "the same cooling of love."

Her conclusion was:

They taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her awhile to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman, and that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand.13

This wandering and experience have brought deeper insights. Now she knows what she is searching for—a spiritual reality, a grounding, a solid, meaningful something to grasp with “an

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12 Ibid., p. 91.
13 Ibid., p. 108.
ungloved hand.”

Sula may lack wholeness, for which she is perhaps seeking, but she is not shallow. She has spiritual depth. In her sexual indulgences she found some kind of gratification whereby she was able to actualize her sense of misery, loneliness, and solitude. In the lull after sexual climax, she would lie long in silence, in the center of which was not eternity, but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning. For loneliness assumed the absence of other people, and the solitude she found in that desperate terrain had never admitted the possibility of other people. She wept then. Tears for the deaths of the littlest things; the castaway shoes of children; broken stems of marsh grass battered and drowned by the sea; prom photographs of dead women she never knew; wedding rings in pawnshop windows; the tidy bodies of cornish hens in a nest of rice.14

The depth expressed in this passage and others depicts Sula as a genuinely interesting and believable character. She is a sensitive, perceptive, creative spirit who feels deeply and identifies with and commiserates with the helpless and seemingly insignificant. Her creativity cannot flower because she can find no anchor, no solid footing from which to reach out and get a handle on reality. One regrets, however, that her character throughout the book is sketchy.

Ntozake Shange in *Nappy Edges* and *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* deals significantly with themes of the search for identity, personhood, a sense of heritage, a desire for oneness, unity, and rootedness as experienced by

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Black women. Coming from more of a Northern background, like Toni Morrison (who was born in Lorraine, Ohio), Shange writes much of her own personal search for wholeness, especially in the book of poems, Nappy Edges. The poems in this book reflect a personal odyssey, both internal and external, in which the author comes to grips with various aspects of herself. The poems in the five sections of the book reflect this journey.

In the first, titled “things I'd say,” the author begins the journey with an examination of her own psychological and artistic make-up. In section two, titled “love & other highways” she moves on to explore other aspects of herself, both inner and outer. The third section, called “closets,” exposes family heritage, cultural background, and other social connections. Section four, titled “& she bleeds,” reflects the process of individuation or self-realization through experience—the moving out from one's early surroundings and actualizing the self in the larger world. In this regard the poem titled “resurrection of the daughter” is exemplary. The final section, called “whispers with the unicorn,” closes the journey with reflection on what the person has become. The poem, “an invitation to my friends,” for example, reveals why music is so much a part of the make-up of the artist.

The poem, “Nappy Edges,” in section three, records the environment in St. Louis and retraces the family’s roots back to South Carolina, whence they moved, obviously a part of the Great Migration North that terminated in Missouri. It then portrays the masses of migrants who came from the South to the city and the kind of life they found and created there—a mixture of music, discrimination, menial labor, ghetto life, and a sense of uprootedness. The poem ends, however, with a strong avowal and affirmation to retain the life and culture that has been forged in this place highly

enlivened and defined by blues, jazz, and rock music.

Shange's choice of her African name and the use of "colored girls" in the title of her choreopoem *For Colored Girls* are indicative of her concern to express a sense of roots in her own life as well as in the poetry she writes. She acknowledges both her African and her American roots. For instance, her grandmother's last words to her were that she was a precious "little colored girl," and this influenced her choice of the title for the book. Moreover, it is true that this was once used as a term of endearment among Blacks.

*For Colored Girls* is both a portrayal of a basic Black female sense of a loss of footing, selfhood, rootedness, or social grounding due to racial and sexual exploitation, and the courageous search for grounding and stability, which is found before the story ends. It is indeed a *spiritual quest*, it entails a death and rebirth, beginning with the seven Black women's delving into themselves and bringing out all the murky experiences of Black women in their sexual relations and history, emerging in the end with a sense of community and oneness, totally transformed.

It is a deeply moving and shattering psychological journey that express all the sordid aspects in as many varieties as possible. Had any one of these women taken the journey alone, it could have been completely devastating, but inasmuch as it was a group venture, it was wholesome and spiritually rewarding. Having completely indulged themselves in the experiences and faced up to the causes of their plight, including their own complicity with their oppression, these women emerge with a new sense of spiritual reality reflected in the refrain "I found God in myself and I loved her/I loved her fiercely."16

In his own life and work the late Howard Thurman graphically portrays the inward journey toward self-realization prior to

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one's being able to come to grips with the diverse realities of a complete life. One of his favorite expressions was, "one must be at home somewhere before she/he can feel at home everywhere." In another place Thurman declares: "My roots are deeply rooted in the throbbing reality of the [Black] idiom and from it I draw a full measure of inspiration and vitality. I know that [one] must be at home somewhere before he [she] can feel at home everywhere."

Ntozake Shange is deeply aware of the problem of homelessness and rootlessness and the search for grounding. In her works the solution is to return to the source, explore it fully, and come back renewed, possibly with the spiritual strength and determination to create a new, well-founded existence. Unlike Morrison, who in *Sula* had no solution but pictures a rather daring and sensitive tragic-heroine in search of herself, Shange implies the necessity of a communal or group effort at facing the problem.

Alice Walker, another writer with a Southern background like Margaret Walker, treats the theme of alienation from one's roots extensively in the women characters she creates. One example is the short story "The Diary of an African Nun." In this story an African woman rejects her traditional tribal religion for Christianity and finds herself cut off from her roots. She then attempts to blend the two realities and work as a nun among her people.

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, by Walker is, as the title suggests, a novel of transformations with profound religious implications. Here the quests involve both male and female characters, but the central character is male. The book is basically about

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his story. The title has echoes of reincarnation, but the action involves psychological and spiritual rebirths which appear to be Alice Walker's solution to the phenomena of uprootedness and homelessness. Uprootedness for Black people in Walker's thinking includes detachment from the African soil and culture. Life in America in general is thus one of uprootedness. For example, when Grange Copeland teaches his granddaughter, Ruth, about her roots, he goes all the way back to the African background. But Walker makes it clear that some roots were also planted in America (family, new cultural setting, religious, social life, community, etc.) — especially in the South. Though life in the South was often marked by the harshness of poverty, discrimination, economic and social oppression, nevertheless, a sense of community or fellowship was achieved. The tendency to go North to escape the severities of Southern living created a new uprootedness and its dire consequences. We see this in several places in the novel, as in the depictions of Marilyn and Silas, Grange’s northern relatives, and Ruth’s sisters, Ornette and Daphne. Practically all the characters in *Third Life* are uprooted, either from the land, as are the sharecroppers; or from a harmonious cultural setting, as are those who go North. The consequences involve a search for meaningful existence—in marriage and family life, in the community, and in the sense of personal dignity. Transformations of personalities result from the search that takes place in the South. Grange’s first wife, Margaret, changes from a submissive, homely type to a good-timing, unfaithful spouse. Brownfield’s wife, Mem, changes twice; first from the educated school teacher to a submissive wife who brings herself down to his level; and then to a forceful, dominant woman who bullies her husband into submitting to her will.

The most significant transformations, however, are those of Grange himself. When we meet him at the opening of the novel he is a bewildered sharecropper who is totally resigned to his fate of
being enslaved to a white landowner. He compensates for this situation by getting drunk on weekends, beating his wife, and sleeping with another woman. His next existence is in the North, in Harlem. There he experiences awakening, after a life of street hustling that includes selling illegal liquor, drugs, and dealing in prostitutes. The cold, detached life of the North does not agree with his temperament. “Among the frozen faces and immobile buildings he had been just another hungry nobody.” There was “no friendliness, no people talking to one another on the street.” And even more cruel was the fact that “to the people he met and passed daily he was not in existence!”

The theme of rootlessness and rootedness is very strong in Grange’s contrast between the North and the South:

The South had made him miserable, with nerve endings raw from continual surveillance from contemptuous eyes, but they knew he was there. Their very disdain proved it. The North put him in solitary confinement where he had to manufacture his own hostile stare in order to see himself.21

But the North had taught him something. It was the realm of his re-education, which helped to bring about his second transformation. Almost like the West African griot, he was able to transmit to his granddaughter Ruth, in his “third life”—the Black cultural orientation, much of which he had learned up North.

There were days devoted to talk about big bombs, the forced slavery of her ancestors, the rapid demise of the red man, the natural predatory tendencies of

the whites, the people who had caused many horrors.

There were days of detailed description of Black history. Grange recited from memory speeches he heard, newscasts, lectures from street corners when he was in the North, everything he had ever heard.22

It is too late for Grange to benefit greatly from all that he has learned; he must slowly feed it to his granddaughter Ruth, who, like her Biblical counterpart, is the hope of generations to come. She may not be the savior, but she will produce the savior who will restore the proper cultural grounding for the descendants. In a sense, Ruth will be the reincarnation of Grange. She will be his “third life”—for the cultivation he slowly exposes her to is the substance of the life he has gleaned from his new existence.

Grange is by no means perfect and Ruth, therefore, will not be perfect. There should be no illusions about this. The things he teaches her are both good and evil. About religion, for example, he teaches her something scornful and ridiculous. In another place he instills in her his bitterness concerning Whites. Yet, he inculcates in her, in his own limited way, a sense of pride in one’s heritage, a cultural grounding, and a strong resolve to survive in a dignified manner. In addition he gave Ruth a sense of pride in her homeland, which he felt surely she would retain.

Now, as he sought to teach the ways of the world to his granddaughter and she resisted him, he was reminded of his own education in foreign parts of the world. For though he hated it as much as any place else, where he was born would always be

22 Ibid., p. 138.
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home. Georgia would be home for him, every other place foreign.23

We may note at this point that in the literature, all characters and personalities display a search for authentic being. In the male characters the quest is for a sense of an acceptable and secure reality in a society where they are a part of a people who have had to prove both to themselves and to their surroundings (other peoples, in a pluralistic setting) that, in spite of previous conditions of servitude, they are full human beings. And this in itself is a spiritual quest. For having been reduced, by abject slavery and discrimination, to inhuman and, in some cases, animal-like existence, it has taken many decades and strong religious orientation for these people to regain a proper sense of human reality and selfhood, as well as peoplehood, for themselves. In the literature, the struggle continues in various ways for different types of persons. The quest is influenced both by society's expectations, including parental demands, and by the characters' own personal hopes and desires. In the male characters the quest is conditioned by American society's value system (whether legitimate or illegitimate) and by expectations regarding the general conception of "manhood." In the female characters the quest is conditioned and influenced by society's value system regarding the family and the sexual and domestic roles that women are expected to play in it. While seeking to live their lives in light of such expectations, both male and female characters embark upon a journey of personal self-realization and fulfillment.

W.E.B. DuBois aptly describes the situation of African Americans as a sense of "twoness," which can account for the further complications of their quests.24 We noted the peculiar prob-

23 Ibid., p. 141.
lems of the quest in the male characters as illustrated in the case of Walker's Grange Copeland. Toni Morrison presents another view of the quest in male characters in her *Song of Solomon*. Here Morrison has much more completely drawn her characters and more fully worked out her plot than in *Sula*. Tracing the theme through this book, one finds her fascinated with social roots, with tales of past Southern existence and the ways in which that past has worked its way into the lives of Blacks living in the North, shaping them and contributing to the difficulties encountered by each character.

There is fascination with each one's tale and how he or she tells it (Pilate, Ruth, Macon, Guitar, Lena). There is wisdom in each one's song of the past. *Song of Solomon* has a teasing, haunting, crazy-quilt plot, strangely held together by the theme suggested in the title, the naming of which (aside from the Biblical implications) is not illuminated until near the end of the book. "Solomon's song" is a song of desertion. Desertion of one's own people. A song of alienation from roots, from kindred; a song of forlornness and forsakeness.

Milkman's great great-grandfather was an African by the name of Solomon who peopled the town of Shalimar (Solomon) with the descendants of his twenty-one sons, and around whom a legend has grown up in the town, which is the focus of a ballad sung by the children at play. Legend has it that after the birth of the twenty-first child, Jake, Milkman's grandfather, Solomon, grew tired of his oppressed state and one day in the cotton fields simply took off and flew back to his homeland of Africa, leaving his children to fend for themselves. Thus the closing words of the song:

> O Solomon don't leave me here
> Cotton balls to choke me

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The religious theme of the broken covenant (with one's past, roots), deviation from the intended goal, wanderings, exile, chaos, and return — echo throughout the novel. The key symbol of death exemplified in the name of the son (Milkman), the father, and the grandfather, all named “Macon Dead,” reflects the quality of existence when one is exiled from one's roots. Ironically, the grandfather, Jake Solomon, is inadvertently given the name by White men as he heads North, leaving his Southern home of Shalimar (Solomon), Virginia, the town where all his people live, including the twenty brothers from whom he has been alienated as a result of the father's desertion of the family. The descendants of this family are experiencing moral and spiritual decadence, symbolized in such expressions as “the Dead Children,” “Pilate Dead,” “Corinthians Dead,” “Magdalena Dead,” “My Name’s Macon: I’m already dead.”

Here we find a mixture of racial abuse and discrimination combined with the theme of family dissociation and alienation at the root of all the resulting decadence. The grandfather, Macon Dead (Jake Solomon), was a strong, resolute, and prosperous landowner in Danville, Pennsylvania, where he settled after his escape North from the Virginia homeland. But the racial disharmony of the area deprived him of both life and property, making it necessary for his two children, Pilate and Macon, to become victims of another uprooting and a further trek northward — away from the Southern roots. The closeness that existed earlier between Pilate.

26 Ibid., p. 307.
and Macon is totally severed as they split up in their early youth and live in alienation from each other for more than twenty years. In the interim, Macon has settled down in a middle class, prosperous situation (however morally decadent), while Pilate has wandered from place to place (outcast by her having been born without a navel) and finally deliberately winds up, worldly-wise, in the same city in Michigan with her brother. There she practices her chosen profession of making and selling whiskey. In her wanderings she has, however, acquired her own family of one daughter and a granddaughter, Rebecca and Hagar Dead. Macon has three children: Milkman (Macon III), Corinthians, and Magdalene, called Lena, and his wife, Ruth, whom he despises.

The jealousy, enmity, and corruption between and within these two families are the cause of Milkman going in search of his Southern roots, a journey which eventually brings wholeness and healing. Unfortunately, the achievement is too late to be of any lasting benefit to Milkman or his Aunt Pilate, for both of them are felled by the greedy and crazed killer, Guitar, just at the point of their felicitous self-discovery. Nevertheless, they find their rough grave amid the soil of the land that bears the name and spirit of their ancestors. They are home and they die with a joyful self-knowledge.

At least some elements of the Night Journey motif are present in the novel. The hero undertakes a return to the source as an exile. Initiation trials take place (the battle with the townspeople of Shalimar, especially the bout with Saul and the hunt scene). But something like a reverse occurs here. There is no re-integration into the former Northern environment from which Milkman journeys forth, but rather reintegrations into the homeland or Southern roots from which his foreparents were exiled. Moreover, Milkman completes the search for home which his Aunt Pilate had initiated in her twenty-odd years of wandering. Of all the Solomon clan, only Pilate and Milkman engage in this search for roots, for a deep-
er self-knowledge and family identity. And it is a search which culminates in joy and peace but also destroys them. Here are echoes of Thomas Wolf's discovery: you can't go home again.

The trek North had been both voluntary and involuntary. The foreparents were compelled by the conditions of slavery and discrimination to seek a better way of life. The North was the place of their choosing. On the children's return, regenerative powers are restored, but the unregenerate (Guitar) remains a threat. He still sees things in black and white whereas Milkman and Pilate have acquired an opaque vision. Guitar is one-dimensional, completely materialistic in his quest. To him Milkman and Pilate, in the final scene, have come to the mountain only to hide the gold he imagines them to have recovered. Guitar is the symbol of continual wanderings and degeneration.

In her autobiographical works Maya Angelou presents a balanced picture of the South, not a sentimentalized version, but one that stresses alike its ugliness and its beauty (its light, shadow, sounds and entrancing odors and the smell of old fears, hates, and guilt). By contrast, she says on a visit South from California: "The hills of San Francisco, the palm trees of San Diego, prostitution and lesbians disappeared into a never-could-have-happened-land." After much travel, hustling, trying to get and keep jobs, and after numerous romantic and other disappointments, California seemed to her a place of comfort. In Gather Together in My Name, written five years after I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, Angelou tells us that she is between seventeen and nineteen years old, living transiently in the San Francisco, Oakland, and San Diego areas with her baby son, and trying to make a sound beginning in life. Battered by its exigencies, she escapes back to Stamps, Arkansas, at age eighteen, only to find that in her awakened sense of pride and

27 Maya Angelou, Gather Together in My Name (New York: Bantam Books, 1974).
independence, fairness and justice, she can no longer live by the patterned, stereotypical style of life which characterizes the racist environment of her native region.

Yet, even as her grandmother protectively packs her off to California once again, after a dangerous situation she created for herself among the local Whites by refusing to conform to their norms, we know that her love of the land is not destroyed. Looking back on it years later she can still cherish its beauty: “Despite the sarcastic remarks of Northerners, who don’t know the region (read North Easterners, Westerners, North Westerners, and Midwesterners), the South of the United States can be so impellingly beautiful that sophisticated creature comforts diminish in importance.”

Although she has written two or more collections of poetry and produced several dramatic pieces, most of Angelou’s writing is autobiographical narrative. She spends much of her creative effort getting and keeping in touch with her sense of self and world. She seems particularly determined to maintain her rootedness, her sense of home. The shattering effect of the central experience described in her first work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was not lasting because she possessed the background of a well-rounded and well-formed character in which to assimilate it, and because she is given to a self-perceptive, self-penetrative style of existence and examination of herself and her environment. Maya Angelou demonstrates the powers of mind and heart that is able to wring meaning from life, whatever its character.

Her sense of wholeness, of an integrated self, comes through in an interview she had in Washington, D.C., in 1981. On that

29 Angelou, *Gather Together*, p. 64.
occasion she said “You bring all your equipment to everything, holding back nothing because that might be the last moment. I am constantly aware of that; which makes me existential in a very strange and serious way. So that all my stuff is here. I mean all my stuff is here. So that when I get on that plane tonight, if it falls, it falls, but darlin’, I will have been as present as possible, and as courageous as possible, and not a bore. Not a drag!!”

The latest author on the scene, Terry McMillan, presents post-Civil Rights, new Black middle class women and their men in quest for authentic existence. Their journey is not North (as in Claude Brown’s Manchild in the Promised Land, but West. It appears that the descendants of those who went North for Brown’s “promised land,” in the next generation that struck out to the West in search of a more authentic existence. Not precisely deprived of material benefits and economic opportunities, they face another type of deprivation. The vestiges of the hardships and handicaps of the former life of a people questing for dignity and respect linger on. Though the main characters of McMillan’s novel, Waiting to Exhale, are four women, the lives of the men who appear in and out of their existence are also expressive of the quest we have examined.

This work exhibits more clearly the distinctions between the male and female quest of this newer generation, the bulk of whom are baby boomers, urban Black middle class (Buppies?) who directly benefitted from the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement of the period 1950 to 1980, and who became successful professionals and business people. Having become economically secure, they now search for dignity, respect, self-fulfillment, and authentic meaning.

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31 It would be interesting to contrast McMillan’s characters with those depicted by E. Franklin Frazier’s analysis of the Black middle class of the 1950s in his Black Bourgeoisie (New York: Collier Books, 1957).
The characters in the world that McMillian depicts are strikingly new in many respects. And the story she tells is very true to life. She deserves high commendation for her portrayal of whole, rounded women and men. All of them have faults. None is perfect. The four women, Bernadine, Gloria, Savannah, and Robin, all yearn for a full life which in their thinking naturally includes marriage and social and sexual fulfillment. They already have comparative financial security. It would seem that the other things for which they yearn are not too much to ask for to make their lives complete. But lurking in their midst is a serious problem that none of them understands. They cannot find and keep what would be called a "good man" to share their lives. Moreover, there is a deeper spiritual problem at issue to which the author does not openly alert her readers. We must discern it for ourselves.

There is a near absence of the traditional spiritual tone that one usually finds in the lives of African Americans. The Church which has always been a strong foundation for Black people is very much in the background. The same can be said for other religious institutions. Here religious institutions appear irrelevant to the serious quest of these women and men for personal fulfillment. With the absence of the usual spiritual guides and comforts, the characters are thrown back upon their own resources. Something almost unique happens here among the four women that is admirable — human bonding. They do not get the men they desire for support, nor do they fall back upon the usual religious supports. McMillan's young women have each other; they bond together, and this becomes a spiritual victory — a new spiritual beginning. They learn to trust one another, to help and support each other; and they learn to trust themselves, they discover their own inner strength. This is a similar development to the affirmation of the closing refrain of For Colored Girls, "I found God in myself, and I loved her fiercely."

The spiritual substance of life, the depth of human meaning, are revealed and penetrated in the several works and artists we
have explored. It should be obvious by now that there is abundant material in this literature, and in many other works by African American writers, for creative theological reflection and insight. The questions we might address to this literature are: What can be discerned of theological significance and insight in this material? How can theology use these insights to achieve a greater degree of relevance and a broader perspective in the real world? How can the genuine experiences and human realities of African Americans (as opposed to the centuries-old stereotypes) as revealed in this literary corpus, better inform current theological discourse and render it more inclusive?

These are the challenges that these contemporary African American women writers bring to the theological enterprise. Of course, they also present many other challenges in other fields of endeavor. But my focus in this discussion has been on the religious import of what Black women writers are saying and the opportunity afforded, especially to us who are in African American religious studies, to mine the theological richness we encounter in their works.

At last he lays his head flat upon the ground, close to my foot, and sets my other foot upon his head, as he has done before, and after this made all signs to me of subjection, servitude, and submission imaginable, to let me know how he would serve me as long as he lived. I understood him in many things, and let him know I was very well pleased with him. In a little time I began to speak to him, and teach him to speak to me; and, first, I made him know his name should be called Friday, which was the day I saved his life. I likewise taught him to say master, and then let him know that was to be my name. [Robinson Crusoe regarding his man, Friday.]

**African American Leadership In A New Key**

With a renaissance in scholarship on Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz) and Martin Luther King, Jr., conversations within and beyond the African American community have focused on the political and social strategies of these two men as resources in articulating a new vision for the struggle against the jagged and complex congeries of race, gender, and class, and their impact on plight of African Americans. Sorely neglected in these conversations is the place of spirituality in the social and political thought

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and praxis of these two men. Beyond their respective approaches to the political and economic spheres of Black existence is a more profound and relevant legacy. Malcolm and Martin leave living testaments of their hope: an irrepressible hope that will not relinquish its hold on the redemptive possibilities inherent in human beings.

Their search for personal wholeness and transformation brought them to the forefront of a political movement that changed the direction of the nation and the world. But the crass and critical issues of our day demand that a “new breed of cat” come on the scene, who, like Malcolm and Martin, are bold and courageous enough to journey through the valley of tradition and orthodoxy. Men and women who are able to wage battle with the legions of doubts and fears that stand guard over our entry into a future laden with ambiguity. The lives of Malcolm and Martin, and the dangerous memories they leave, are summons for a new vanguard of visionaries: a generation of new leaders who are spiritually disciplined and intellectually astute, able to interpret the present madness that is upon us, and to prescribe new formulae and possibilities for a people rapidly losing hope.

Martin and Malcolm represent “dangerous memories” and redemptive possibilities in the struggle for justice. In Malcolm and Martin, spirituality and social transformation are the dominant themes which define and make available the resources for this hope. For King, this theme is the basis for his articulation of the beloved community ideal. For Malcolm, spirituality and social transformation are the keys which decipher the sphinx-like riddle of his ironic quest for just relations among human beings.

Make no mistake, Malcolm and Martin were different. Attempts to create complementarity between the two where it does not exist are unproductive and futile. But while there are distinct differences in approaches to their respective goals, beyond (perhaps, beneath) their differences in methodology and ideology lies the common quest for personal wholeness and identity in a recalcitrant,
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racist society that militates against such possibility. The work of social transformation in both men is inextricably bound with their religious quests for authentic personhood. Their personal quests ultimately involve searches for radical change in public policy and practice. One can hardly miss this truth in reviewing the spiritual developments of these Black titans.2


Cornel West has brilliantly analyzed the contemporary moral straitjacket which has stymied the potential for creative national leadership and wreaked deleterious effects on African American leadership in particular. He cites the foibles of structuralist and behaviorist interpretations and recommendations for those at the bottom of the American social ladder. He argues that this debate "conceals the most basic issue now facing black America: the nihilistic threat to its very existence." Beyond political and economic remedies, while significant, the threat of personal meaninglessness, despair, and worthlessness, brought about in large part by unbridled market forces and political chicanery, is the real challenge that confronts African Americans and the national community. West calls for a new kind of moral leadership which moves beyond the "pitfalls of racial reasoning" and the lack of courage to address "the market moralities of black life" and "the crisis of black leadership." He recommends "a politics of conversion" fueled by a love ethic which has historically sustained the African American community. Important for our purposes is his identification of memory and hope as key resources in the politics of conversion: "Self-love and love of others," he writes, "are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community. These modes of valuation and resistance are rooted in subversive memory—the best of one's past without romantic nostalgia—and guided by a universal ethic of love."^3

West's call for a new kind of moral leadership emanating from the grassroots is not a new phenomenon in American society, but what is refreshing and potentially creative is his sensitivity to the interrelated necessities of personal and social transformation. A significant element of this new kind of leadership is the emphasis on transformation which requires a return to memory as a basis for hope

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without romanticization and trivialization of the arduous paths which must be trod in order to translate this memory into praxis. In this respect the dangerous memories of Martin and Malcolm are important, but not adequate in and of themselves to fuel the assault against hopelessness that plagues our beleaguered communities. While the dream of the beloved community of Martin Luther King, Jr. still inspires us to uplift the dignity and worth of human personality, even toward our enemies, his method of nonviolent direct action may not be adequate to transform the hardened and intransigent structures of a morally reprobate society. And likewise, while the rugged vision of African American unity, articulated by Malcolm X, still reminds us that self-love and militancy are the logical demands for powerless and oppressed peoples, still they do not answer the ultimate need for a relational love ethic in a universe that cannot exist without it. What we need is not an either/or alternative between Malcolm and Martin, or between militant aggression or moral suasion. We need rather a new creative vision which is a synthesis of both.

The scope and shape of this new vision will depend largely on our willingness as individuals and as a nation to enter the not-trespassing zones of this world system and to inquire about the meaning of our existence on these shores. More fundamentally, it will demand an internal revolution, in King’s language, of values and priorities. In order to make this journey into the interior we need guides who have left maps of the spiritual landscape. It will require most of all, a radical conversion of our social understandings of self, which are the products of a competitive market economy that pits individuals and racial/ethnic groups against one another. For African Americans, in particular, it means literally a return to memory, a soul journey in the caves of our ancestors where we hear again the rhythmic murmurings of the Black and angry dead—but more so, where again we learn the lessons of those who surround us
as a great cloud of witnesses.\footnote{Moral leadership refers to "the process of morality to the degree that leaders engage with followers on the basis of shared motives and values and goals." James MacGregor Burns, \textit{Leadership} (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979), p. 36. "The essence of leadership in any polity is the recognition of real need, the uncovering and exploiting of contradictions among values and between values and practice, the realigning of values, the reorganization of institutions where necessary, and the governance of change. Essentially the leader's task is consciousness-raising on a wide plane . . . A congruence between the need and value hierarchies would produce a powerful potential for the exercise of purposeful leadership." (Burns, 43-44) In this sense, moral leadership is transformational as opposed to transactional (e.g., Weber's distinction between an ethic of responsibility versus an ethic of ends: the former seeks purposeful, cooperative change based on inclusiveness and equality; the latter maintains the status quo by minimizing conflict through hegemonic practices).}

\textbf{The Civilization of Friday}

Cornel West's call for a \textit{politics of conversion} presupposes the nexus of memory and hope. African American leadership cannot begin this spiritual process until there is a willingness to return to its religio-cultural roots of sacrifice and service. This return to a sane place will require a radical deconstruction of self in the midst of a multiplicity of forces that stand guard over our entry into a new future. In other words, the politics of conversion presupposes psychic conversion. The psychic conversion of Malcolm and the transformed nonconformity which King talked about involve a type of existential death—a blessed irrationality born of the refusal to submit to market mentalities and cultural cages which inhibit the birthing of new names and redemptive possibilities.

The anatomy of the kind of personal transformation which is an integral dimension of the politics of conversion can be seen in the dynamics of the master/slave relation imbedded in the dominant discourse of Euro-western hegemonic practices. The civilization of Friday, Robinson Crusoe's man, offers some insight into the modalities of self-devaluation and the need to move beyond the superimposed categories of domination and subordination in search
of authentic selfhood. It is at once a window through which we can see the underlying dynamics of slave morality and the internalized gaze which inhibits conversation between the builders of the American tower of Babel and the stones that the builders rejected.

The name given to the “savage” whom Crusoe rescued on the deserted island, where he had shipwrecked twenty-three years earlier, is of particular importance. He named him “Friday”—the day of the week he “saved his life.” The ascription “Friday” denotes the day of the week in which the savage is brought into “real time”, that is, civilized time—the time of the master. Crusoe not only names him, but in effect names his world, his etiquette, his language, his symbols, his culture—indeed his humanity. In Crusoe’s mind, before meeting him, the child/savage was in bondage to the elemental forces of nature. His existence is bestial, but the master teaches him his language. Even more is at stake in Friday’s civilization. For Crusoe, it is the religion of Providence that legitimizes his function as master and teacher. Race, religion, and culture meld together in a seamless construction of hierarchy. In order for Friday to be saved he must become civilized. Friday understands his role and consciously subjects himself to his master.

“At last he lays his head flat upon the ground, close to my foot, and sets my other foot upon his head, as he has done before, and after this made all signs to me of subjection, servitude, and submission imaginable, to let me know how he would serve me as long as he lived.” Friday has learned through the appropriation of the master’s language that his place in the hierarchy of the cosmos is at his master’s feet. Incivility is sin, licentiousness, bestiality, mindlessness, chaos, and all manner of evil.

Better not get too loud, Friday! Don’t touch holy things, Friday! Be still, Friday! Refuse to be a body! Friday, you have nei-
ther voice nor eyes. Be good, Friday!5

This particular sample of Western literary discourse provides a helpful entree into the struggle of African Americans to achieve and conform to an image of self which is not catacombed in the mindless mazes of subjection to an ethic which predisposes them to a life of inferiority and second-class citizenship. But the challenge of African Americans to free themselves from the gaze of Crusoe is double-edged. One cannot begin this conversation in a vacuum. Friday cannot be free until he rebels against Crusoe. Crusoe’s identity, on the other hand, is bound to his perception of Friday. Friday’s rebellion creates a kind of cultural apoplexy in which Crusoe is both victimizer and patient, because Crusoe—not Friday—is the object of rebellion. Yet there is an even more nefarious warfare raging within Friday. How can he destroy the master without initiating his own demise?

America stands in the place of Crusoe, the civilizer and the patient. Friday is the destroyer and redeemer. Friday’s freedom is an exercise in death. He must die in order to live, he must rebel in order to hope. When Friday announces his intention, Crusoe tightens the noose, but in tightening the noose he destroys himself.

Who frees Friday from himself? God, religion, politics, economic development, and all the recommendations that shout at him daily from a fragmented discourse which falls back on itself?6

5 Daniel Defoe’s The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe is a classic, or as one commentator puts it, it is “universal and lasting.” Written by Defoe and published in England in 1719, the book was translated into French, German, and Dutch the following year, marking an unprecedented series of translations into other languages. I make mention of its remarkable origins in order to underscore its availability and popular ascent in the European mindscape since the 18th century. In this respect, it is an exemplary text of the moral discourse and metaphysics of civilization. Ronald Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 108-144. “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.” Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (Paladin, 1970), p. 13.

No, Friday must free himself from Crusoe’s gaze. This internalized look of the other, this stalking fear of madness. Friday must discover his name as a counter-name to the ascription which Crusoe has given—but even more, Friday must find a new name, a name not proscribed and prescribed by the master’s time. Friday’s rebellion is against his socially constructed self—he must for the first time see himself through his own eyes and speak with his own voice. This requires a journey into the “cave”—that trysting place where he wrestles with the shadows, the appearances that flash against wall of his consciousness—a consciousness shaped by years of bondage to the name, the thing outside of himself. It is at once recognition, defiance, and play: recognition of the twisted and contorted stare at one’s self; insight into the incivility of the Cross which is a personal act of transgression and defiant speech; and linguistic play on a morality which signifies on all good Fridays.

A Strange Freedom

It is a strange freedom to be adrift in the world of men, to act with no accounting, to go nameless up and down the streets of other minds where no salutation greets and no sign is given to mark the place one calls one’s own . . . The name marks the claim a man stakes against the world; it is the private banner under which he moves which is his right whatever else betides. The name is a man’s water mark above which the tide can never rise. It is the thing he holds that keeps him in the way when every light has failed and every marker has been destroyed. It is the rallying point around which a man gathers all that he means by himself. It is his announcement to life that he is present and accounted for in all his parts. To be made anonymous and to give the acquiescence of the heart is to live without life, and for such a
one, even death is no dying.
To be known, to be called by one’s name, is to find one’s place and hold it against the hordes of hell. This is to know one’s value for one’s self alone. It is to honor an act as one’s very own, it is to live a life that is one’s very own, it is to worship a God who is one’s very own.⁷

Howard Thurman’s work is an excellent place to begin this initial task of conversion, the transformation of subjugated consciousness. He often stated, “The time and place of a person’s life on earth is the time and place of the body, but the meaning and significance of that life is as far-reaching and redemptive as the gifts, the dedication, the response to the demand of the times, the total commitment of one’s powers can make it.”⁸ What does it mean to live life seriously (not to take life seriously)? To live freely and unencumbered by the necessity of always conforming to external things that limit our potential to be authentically human in the world? Thurman thought it demanded a journey into the interior, into those places we have sealed off and secured with no-trespassing signs. It meant, for him, an inward journey into dangerous territory, where the real issues of life and death must be confronted, where the “Angel with the flaming sword” greets us— where we are not allowed entry unless we yield “the fluid center of our consent.”

There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the “angel with

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the flaming sword.” Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of inner authority. Nothing passes “the angel with the flaming sword” to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of “the fluid area of your consent.” This is your link with the Eternal.⁹

This journey into the interior, according to Thurman, is not extraordinary; in many respects, it is far removed from what we normally call “religion.” The Angel with the flaming sword is encountered in the mundane, earthly experiences of being and living in the world. At any junction in the road there may suddenly appear a sign, a flash, a burning bush, which places us in candidacy for this experience. Often in struggle, in crisis, in the heart of suffering and trial, one encounters the Angel, the truth about one’s self, the mendacious stereotypes about self and others, and the subtle and surreptitious ways in which one has been named.

Luther Smith correctly observes that for Thurman “the crucible of relationship” provides the hermeneutical key for ascertaining meaning in the various modes of existence in which one finds oneself. In this perspective, epistemological and axiological questions are grounded in a moral anthropology that avoids the dichotomous portrayal of the self as an irreconcilable tension between nature and spirit. Rather, for Thurman, the self is essentially relational and agential. Ratiocination is a secondary act. “The deed reveals meaning. Meaning does not exist as a disembodied force, but it becomes evident through relationships.” All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action is for the sake of loving relationship. Religious faith, therefore, is not to be confused with dogmatic assertions fixed in creed and formal statements. Rather it has to do with “literal truth and the conviction it inspires.” This truth is disclosed in creative encounter with

⁹ Thurman, Meditations of the Heart (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press), p. 15.
Thurman emphasized the dynamic, intuitive nature of truth. He characterized intuitive knowledge as “immediate, direct, and not an inference from logic . . . It is an awareness of literal truth directly perceived.” In Thurman’s conceptualization of spirituality and social transformation, which he referred to as “the inner life and world-mindedness,” the individual is the point of departure. A persistent note in his thinking is that one must begin with oneself, with one’s own “working paper.” The development of a sense of self is the basis upon which one comes to understand one’s own unique potential and self-worth. Without a sense of self, the person drifts aimlessly through life without a true understanding of his or her place in existence. A healthy sense of self is garnered out of a dynamic tension between the individual’s self-fact and self-image.

The person’s self-fact is her or his inherent worth as a child of God. It is the central fact that one is part of the very movement of life itself. The individual’s self-image is formed by relationships with others, and to a large extent, self-image determines one’s destiny. However, the individual’s case must ultimately rest with his or her self-fact of intrinsic worth. Thurman writes, “The responsibility for living with meaning and dignity can never be taken away from the individual.” This is a significant point for his treatment of the individual’s response to dehumanizing onslaughts like racism and

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other forces that work against human potential and community. Consequently, his usage of terms like “inner life” or “inner awareness” refer to more than the formal discursive activity of the mind, but rather include the entire range of the individual’s self-awareness. “Inner life” means

... the awareness of the individual’s responsiveness to realities that are transcendent in character, emanating from a core of Reality which the individual is aware and of which the individual is also aware that he is a part. The inner life, therefore, is activity that takes place within consciousness, but does not originate there and is a part of a Reality central to all life and is at once the ground of all awareness. It is there that man becomes conscious of his meaning and destiny as a child, an offspring of God.

The “interiority of religious experience,” as I am using it, is synonymous with Thurman’s terminology, “the inner life.” “Interiority” means to belong to the inner constitution or concealed nature of something; it connotes dimensionality, that which lies away from the border or shore. For Thurman, therefore, religious experience is a journey into the inner regions of self; an exploration into that which is normally concealed from the conscious mind. It

13Ibid.
is in this experience of self-exploration that one discovers what she or he amounts to, one’s inherent value and worth as a child of God.\textsuperscript{14}

Since the cultivation of the inner life is the basis for the development of a genuine sense of self and authentic existence in the world, it is in this process that one discovers one’s name and destiny as a child of God. Thurman is acutely aware of the danger of subjectivism and the privatization of meaning implied in the emphasis on the development of inner consciousness. He guards against this tendency by accentuating the need for empirical verification of what one experiences in her or his inner life. “The real questions at issue here,” he contends, “are, how may a man know he is not being deceived? Is there any way by which he may know beyond doubt, and therefore with verification, that what he experiences is authentic and genuine?”\textsuperscript{15} Religious faith, therefore, is “the tutor” or the “unseen model” by which one structures the facts

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{14} Religious experience is defined by Thurman as “the conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God. Such an experience seems to the individual to be inclusive of all the meaning of his life—there is nothing that is not involved.” Thurman, \textit{The Creative Encounter}, p. 20.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{15} Thurman, \textit{Creative Encounter}, 57. Rational coherence between the inner experience of self and the social world is the method employed to test for self-deception. He argues that “Whatever seems to deny a fundamental structure of orderliness upon which rationality seems to depend cannot be countenanced.” Ibid, 57-58. Walter G. Muelder suggests that the underlying ethical theory which is operative in this construal is neither heteronomous, nor autonomous, but theonomous: “This means that the imperatives are not imposed from external sources, nor completely devised by inner personal mandates, but express at the deepest level a metaphysical divine moral order which is also the rational law of a person’s own being. There is a meeting place for the communication between God and the person, a place of yielding private, personal will to transcending purposes that are at the same time common ground. Here revelation and intuition meet, a place rich with the sense of the ultimate worth of the individual as a private and social person.” Walter G. Muelder, “The Structure of Howard Thurman’s Religious Social Ethics,” p. 9; Nicolas Berdyaev argues that emergence from subjectivity proceeds along two distinct lines: objectivization and transcendence or transcendentence, the former leading to bondage because it alienates the divine image from itself which is personality, and the latter leading to authentic freedom because it raises the person to the level of the transsubjective, to the realm of Spirit, which is freedom. See Berdyaev, \textit{Slavery and Freedom}, p. 29.
\end{quote}
of his or her experience. For this reason, Thurman counseled:

[T]he person concerned about social change must not only understand the materials with which he has to do, the things which he is trying to manipulate, to reorder, to refashion, but again and again he must expose the roots of his mind to the literal truth that is the tutor of the facts, the orderer and reorderer of the facts of his experience.16

This must be done, Thurman contended, so that in the quest for social justice, one’s vision of society never conforms to some external pattern, but is “modeled and shaped in accordance to the innermost transformation that is going on in his spirit.”17 Accordingly, it was his insistence that those who were engaged in acts of liberation continually examine the sources of their motivation and the ways in which the circling series of social processes which they seek to change are related to their spiritual pilgrimage. Always, the primary questions for the social activist are, “What are you trying to do with your life? What kind of person are you trying to become?”18

It was Thurman’s conviction that the individual in his or her actions “is trying to snare into the body of his facts, his conviction of those facts.” He cautioned, however, that faith thusly understood always runs the risk of becoming idolatrous, as in patriotic visions of “the American way.”19 Consequently, one must always examine the motivational content of action that involves a tutoring

16 Thurman, “He Looked For A City.” Taped Sermon, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, January 2, 1955, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University.
17 Ibid.
18 See Thurman, Disciplines, pp. 26-37, where he discusses three primary questions related to the discipline of commitment. They are respectively, “Who am I?,” “What do I want?,” and “How do I propose to get it?”
19 Thurman, “He Looked For A City.”
of the will by the unseen model that, for Thurman, was the truth which is resident within the individual. Here the issues of identity, purpose, and method are combined in relation to the social context in which the individual finds himself or herself.

For the marginalized person, this exploration into interiority is especially significant since it underscores the preeminence of self-actualization in the midst of recalcitrant and obtrusive power arrangements that war against personal meaning and social space. According to Thurman, there is within each individual a basic need to be cared for and understood in a relationship with another at a point that is beyond all that is good and evil. In religious experience, this inner necessity for love is fulfilled in encounter with God and in community with others. In the presence of God and in relation with others, the person is affirmed and becomes aware of being dealt with totally.

Whether he is a good person or a bad person, he is being dealt with at a point beyond all that is limiting, and all that is creative within him. He is dealt with at the core of his being, and at that core he is touched and released.20

As one dares to ask the primary questions of identity, purpose, and method, and is willing to be tutored by the “sound of the genuine” that is within,21 a re-freshing occurs; a new sense of self

20 Howard Thurman, The Growing Edge (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1974), p. 68. See also, Thurman, The Creative Encounter, p. 115. Luther Smith’s perceptive analysis of relationality as the hermeneutical key to Thurman is helpful. He cautions that, “Thurman’s introspective approach to reality and meaning should not be interpreted as a self-centered exercise. He begins with himself, but moves out to society as an arena of discovery and involvement. Thurman says that the sense of self may precede the sense of community and the history which forms it, but in fact the self is shaped by community. Community, and its history, precede the self; we are born into community.” Smith, “Intimate Mystery,” p. 91.
21 See Thurman, “Meaning is Inherent in Life,” in The Inward Journey, pp. 14-15
and Presence emerge which enables one to re-enter the struggle with new courage and determination. Thurman understood this quest for personal space to involve defiant activity, for it presupposes that the one’s liberative quest in society cannot ultimately be divorced from one’s wrestling with the internal issues of power and dominance. Jesus, like the rest of humanity, was not immune from the dilemmas of existence and the temptations to personally dominate others and to cling to security and comfort. Jesus’s defiance is best articulated in his conscious choice to go to Jerusalem though he knew it meant death to challenge a obdurate culture.

Ultimately, the interiority of religious experience brings us to crossroads where we must “choose.” Thurman believed that this is the faith that is courage and the courage that is faith. No one escapes this awful demand, especially no one who dares to challenge the political and economic structures which name one’s position in the world. The challenge before the leadership in African American communities, and indeed the leadership of the nation, is one that calls forth this daring to enter the unsafe places of the transformed nonconformists. This daring to speak to the world out of the depths of a new-found, twice-born courage. It is an encounter with the Crucified One, that dangerous memory from the past and the redemptive possibility of the present. It is for this reason that Black theological discourse must explore more intensely the relationship of spirituality and social transformation and the nexus of memory and hope in the liberation of Friday.


24 This was the basis for Thurman’s perception of the church as a resource for activists: “To me it was important that individuals who were in the thick of social change would be able to find renewal and fresh courage in the spiritual resources of the church. There must be provided a place, a moment, when a person could declare, ‘I choose!’” Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman (San Francisco: Hartcourt, Janovich, Brace, 1979), p. 160.
The Power of Language
And the Language of [Em]Power[ment]

In any given context consisting of a variety of people and perspectives from different places and positions we find a variety of views on any given topic. Certainly this is true on the question of inclusive language. Perspectives may range from those who are actively committed to language revision, to those who fail to see the relevancy of the issues, to those who adamantly challenge the audacity of women to raise such issues.

So, notwithstanding the fact that what follows in this essay will in some instances be preaching to the already converted, I hope to be able at least to raise for consideration and discussion some of the issues, and the significance of those issues in the Church and the larger society. The already converted, and those who are open to being converted, are the persons who readily listen to and are prepared to affirm these analyses and challenges. Or at least they are amenable to the possibility of being convinced that the arguments for inclusive language are valid and need to be taken seriously.

I am reminded of my old critique of Black and other ethnic studies programs in seminary and college/university contexts across the country. The people who take the courses offered in these programs tend to be those who are liberal enough to at least recognize the need for change, even if they themselves are only willing to make superficial changes. The ones for whom the courses would be of greatest benefit—for raised consciousness which might be expected to influence changed behavior—are not always open even to the

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transforming possibilities of the Spirit. In the same vein, concerning the matter of language, the varying degrees of openness to the subject is dependent upon whether or not one has decided to catch the spirit or control the spirit, or fear those who are in control of the spirit. I continue to hear the stories of women in the ministry and women seminarians who find it impossible to understand the relevance of inclusive language. For example, I was told a few years ago by a clergywoman, “I asked a couple of women in ministry in Alabama if they knew Dr. Jacquelyn Grant. One responded, “Oh you mean that woman who is trying to change the sex of God?” (Laughter) Trying to change the sex of God? Could they not see that if they are concerned about the sex of God being changed, they must have already internalized a male God which they find difficult to give up. In effect, they have already limited God.

I continue to be amazed at the unwillingness, and sometimes inability, of women seminarians and clergy to see and understand the need for reforming religious and theological language. Is it, I ask myself, that they are simply unable to perceive how the prevailing theological symbolism and language work in their disfavor?

Because of my regular participation in a local church, and conducting seminars, workshops, and lecturing and preaching across the country, I am very much in touch with what many church people are thinking—or more accurately—what they are not thinking about. It is clear that inclusive language is one of those things about which the majority of people is not thinking. Many would see what they would call preoccupation with inclusive language as trivial, if, in fact, not totally inconsequential. And so it is conceivable that even in enlightened sectors of the general population there are those who may respond in similar ways.

My rejoinder to this kind of thinking is that if the issue of language is so unimportant, so insignificant, so trivial, why does it cause such a stir when merely raised for consideration. If it does not matter that generic language is male, or that God is spoken of in
terms of male imagery, then it should equally not matter if these
words and images were changed, or rendered interchangeable with
feminine words and imageries. If nothing else, reactions dem-
strate to us that “it makes a difference.”

What difference do words make? What images do we cre-
ate in our use of language/words? What does language suggest about
human beings, about God? My response to these and other ques-
tions which I will raise during the next few pages comes out of the
perspective of one womanist who is consistently involved in analyz-
ing the situation of African American women in the church and
society. In reflecting upon these questions, I explore some of the
issues that are important to me as a womanist theologian.

The Power of Language

When met with the challenge, many would argue for the
purity and objectivity of language that comes, they argue, from “nat-
ural developments.”¹ This makes it difficult if not impossible for
them to see the problem. Work in this area then, is seen as “tam-
pering’ with the language.” An exploration into the history of the
use of the male gender as generic, for example, demonstrates how
language is anything but “natural.” Language is contrived, it is
designed, often for specific purposes. Emswiler and Emswiler draw
our attention to four incidents in the history of the development of
sexist language.² (1)In 1553 Thomas Wilson argued “before an
almost exclusively male audience in England” that it was more nat-
ural that man precede woman in writing or speaking. That is, one
should say “husband and wife” and not “wife and husband.” This,
of course, is merely reflective of the natural superiority of men over

¹Sharon Neufer Emswiler and Thomas Neufer Emswiler, Women and Worship: A Guide To
11.
²Ibid., p. 11.
women. (2) Building upon this notion, by 1646 Joshua Poole was arguing that the male should take the “pride of place,” because the male gender is the “worthier” gender. (3) In 1746 John Kirkby in his “Eighty-Eight Grammatical Rules” included Rule #21 which stated that the male gender was “more comprehensive” than the female gender. This moved the argument a bit further, from the mere notion that the male is better, more important, preferable, to the notion that the male is universal. (4) Finally, in 1850 an Act of Parliament stated that legally, the word “he” stood for “she.” What we see here in these selected moments in the history of sexist language is the process of the institutionalization of so-called generic/universal language as male language. Frank and Treichler in their volume Language, Gender and Professional Writing, provide some insights into how this generic language worked.

The use of male “generics” is not free from social and political influences. As Charlotte Carmichael Stopes points out in her 1908 history of the words ‘man’ and ‘woman’ in British charters and statutes, “‘man’ always includes ‘woman’ when there is a penalty to be incurred [but] it never includes ‘women’ when there is a privilege to be conferred.” Similarly, an 1872 feminist tract on the political disabilities of women (preserved in the Fawcett Library, London) observes that “[w]ords [like ‘he’ and ‘man’] importing the masculine gender [have been held in court] to include women in the clauses imposing burdens, and to exclude them in the clauses conferring privileges, in one and the same Act of Parliament.” A case in point, detailed by Mary Roth Walsh, was the debate over the admission of women physicians into the Massachusetts Medical Society between 1850 and 1880; opposition rested firmly on the interpretation of ‘he,’ ‘man’ and ‘person’ in the bylaws as sex-specific—that is, as meaning “men only.”
War I, the U.S War Department equated ‘persons’ with ‘men’ preventing women physicians from becoming officers; during the critical shortages of World War II, however—and in response to an intensive lobbying campaign by women physicians—this interpretation was declared “mid-Victorian” and ‘persons’ was taken to include women. Walsh’s book takes its title from an ironic and bitter 1946 newspaper advertisement protesting postwar sex discrimination against women physicians: “Doctors Wanted: Women Need Not Apply”; the apparently generic word ‘doctor’ had in fact become sex-specific, once again designating only men.3

It is clear that language, contrary to the opinion of many, is not merely an expression of thought, but language forms thoughts, ideas and images. As such it is a powerful tool. Language can be used to build community or to destroy it. It can affirm humanity or deny it. It can include or exclude. It can empower or disempower. It should be obvious, therefore, that the control of language via creation and definition makes for the control of people. It assists the process of keeping certain people in their prescribed place. It orchestrates peoples’ feelings about themselves and about others.

Language As A Theological Issue

As a womanist challenging the Black Church in particular and the larger Church in general, I customarily remind Black women and men that we as African Americans are not unfamiliar with the power of language when negatively applied to (or against) a people by virtue of who they are. In other words, we have been this way before. Black people have been victimized by another

imposed universalized experience. In my *Systematic Theology* class, I generally give a talk about the importance of language in order to indicate that inclusive language will be used in all work done in the class. For the first time this year, however, I included a section entitled "Language as a Theological Issue." In order to get students to understand the problem, I do comparative reflections demonstrating how language has been used against Black peoples. Since the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta is a predomi-
nately African American institution, many of our students are able to understand the power of language from their own experience of being an African American person in a racist society. In American society, to be Black is to be bad, inferior, evil, less than . . . It is to be criminal, to be on the dark side of life. This, as compared to what it means to be the more normative, universal White. To be White is to be good, superior, angelic, more than . . . It is to be the defin-
ers of what and who is criminal. It is to be on the light side of life. It is the preferred existence. If one is not White, then the goal is to be as close to White as possible. These stereotypes have been so ingrained in our society that they are bought into by many Whites and Blacks alike. The power of language is of such force that it undergirds the social, political and economic interests of the power-
ful. Is it not conceivable then that just as language has been used against Blacks, it has been used against women as well?

This fact indicates to me as a womanist, therefore, that the question is much larger than the question of sexist language. Just as we see in the development of sexist language, one could consider the development of White language/experience as universal. For example, history for so long meant real history, that is to say, the his-
tory of White people. Liberation movements have called our atten-
tion to the histories/stories of various peoples. A part of the libera-
tion struggles is the development of a language that fosters rather than stifles the process of liberation.
The Power of Language

In actuality, my primary concern, obviously, is one of oppressive language in our churches and society. Elsewhere I have discussed my views about the nature of oppressive language and the challenges facing the Church and society today. In an essay entitled "Come To My Help Lord, for I'm In Trouble . . ."4, I deal with the issue of oppressive language in the larger theological and christological contexts. Three areas in which it is evident that oppressive language serves the purpose of reinforcing oppressive structures are race relations, class relations, and sex/gender or male/female relations.

(1) The problem with race relations is that we live in a society where White supremacy ideology yet reigns. It is infinitely better to be White than it is to be Black. This notion is still manifested in all aspects of life. Even in spite of most recent political gains, Black people are still measurably weaker than their White counterparts. Economically, although we find pockets of middle class Blacks, the masses of Black people are still disproportionately poor. Even in cities like Atlanta where political leadership is overwhelmingly Black, as is the population, the economic power base is still overwhelmingly White. Our histories and herstories are still written from the perspectives of the conquerors—those in power. What this means is that the negative and positive social, political, economic, historical, and psychological imageries are reflected theologically. Because, as mentioned above, White supremacy mandates that Black denotes evil and White denotes good, it follows that God, by necessity, is associated with that which is good, pure, and

clean. And, of course, God is imaged as White. So many church people, we note, continue to sing, “God wash me whiter that snow.” A language that perpetuates this black/white dualism undergirds this oppressive imagery. The oppressive language of White supremacy needs to be abandoned.

(2) The problem of class relations is certainly not helped by our insistence on servanthood language in the Christian tradition. Because of our tendency to use the sacred only to advance the secular when convenient for the political interests of those in power, servanthood language has been used to further enslave the enslaved. It has provided an incredible opportunity for theological double-talk. Whereas we are all, as followers of Jesus Christ, servants striving to manifest Christ in our lives, it is also true that “some folks are always more servant than others” by political, economic location, and so-called theological designation. Black men are still servants of servants, White women are still servants of servants, and Black women are still servants of the servants of servants.

It may be well to call a moratorium on the use of servanthood language among poor and oppressed peoples, even though we might want to continue it in and among the communities of the White, rich, and powerful. Perhaps this would free us to new possibilities for languaging, imaging, and imagining ourselves as well as our divinities.

(3) The problem of sex/gender or male/female relations stems from the fact that patriarchy advocates male supremacy and female allegiance to that supremacy. That which is male is considered better, stronger, greater, smarter, and, therefore, the one who is to be in authority over all others. That which is normative, then, is to be found in that which is male. What is required is the elimination of gender dualisms which keep us man/male in our social analysis and theology. Sexist/male language that undergirds oppressive male/female relationships must be eradicated in order to pave the way for new ways of languaging, imaging, and imagining humanity.
The Power of Language

and divinity.

What is being argued here is that oppression has been institutionalized through structures, and language is one of the primary ways in which these structures have been upheld. What good does it do to say that we are not racist, or sexist, or classist when efforts to see the divine in all of humanity is met with disdain. Why does it elicit responses like “you’re preaching hatred,” or “you’re stirring up the trouble,” or “everything would be fine if you would stop talking about it.”

What could it mean theologically to give up investments in racist, sexist, and classist language? It means that we would be free to re-image and to re-imagine both humanity and divinity.

**A Language of [Em]power[ment]**

The critical question that we should wrestle with is how shall we imagine divinity, and how shall we speak? A large sector of the feminist movement has been about recovering much of the lost traditions of women and the feminine, seeking to make visible biblical and historic manifestations of the divine feminine, or the divine in feminine form. A significant part of this quest for the feminine divinity is the revision of language, i.e., the way we speak about divinity. It becomes just as important to see the mother as it is to see the father in divinity. Or to put it another way, God is as much mother as God is father. The male aspect of God can no longer be universalized.

At the same time language applied to humanity must also be revised to reflect the totality of humanity. The male experience can no longer be normalized as universal. On the other hand, the feminine must be elevated and thus imbued with power.

Womanist biblical scholar Clarice J. Martin puts the challenge this way:
We must “widen the margins” of the language and imagery that we use for God. This means that we must consciously incorporate the whole range of imagery and metaphor for God available to us in scripture, including feminine and masculine imagery, and the imagery for God that is not gender-related. The impetus for this conscious “readjustment” of the margins or limits of our theological discourse about God is prompted not only by major societal shifts toward more inclusive language usage for females and males in the public and private spheres. More important, the use of inclusive language is rooted in the biblical witness itself. The church is called to be faithful to all of scripture used to talk to God and about God. Only then can our creeds, prayers, hymns, educational curricula, and other forms of communicative discourse in our corporate life represent the richness and wealth mirrored in scripture itself.5

If in scripture, we find presentations of the divinities, employing both feminine and masculine imageries, why is it so unthinkable that God could be just as much mother as God is father? Critics of this line of argument are fond of asking: “If it is problematic to speak of God as father, isn’t it equally problematic to speak of ‘him’ as mother?”

Indeed, it is if, in fact, one merely covers the masculine “him/he” with the word “mother” or “she/her,” or if one merely substitutes the image “mother” for the image “father.” A God exclusively mother is just as problematic as a God exclusively father. It is reasonable to project that God is both and more . . . That is to say, God is mother and father, and God is much beyond what we

understand as mother and father. To put the matter differently, God is feminine and masculine and much, much more. Jann Clanton, in her book *In Whose Image?* pointedly asks, “If God can include three persons, can’t God include two genders?” In other words, if God can be three-in-one, as believers in the Trinity confess, then certainly, God can be two-in-one, masculine and feminine. The one is no more miraculous than the other. Perhaps we have reached the *kairos*, the appointed time, the moment when we would benefit from another Ecumenical Council to further explore the issues of Nicea and Chalcedon. How shall we understand the Godhead? How shall we understand the Jesus or the Christ event?

Some years ago, I acknowledged the model of William Eichelberger, who was able to see God in some respects in radically non-traditional ways:

God, in revealing Himself and His attributes from time to time in His creaturely existence, has exercised His freedom to formalize His appearance in a variety of ways.... God revealed Himself at a point in the past as Jesus the Christ, a Black male...I am constrained to believe that God in our times has updated His form of revelation to western society...God is now manifesting Himself...in the form of the Black American Woman as mother, as wife, as nourisher, sustainer and preserver of life...The Black Woman has born our grief and carried our sorrows...It appears that she may be the instrumentality through whom God will make us whole.  

Though there are traditional notions in midst of the non-

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traditional, the point here is to free God from the limitations and imprisonment of human thoughts and language. If Christian doctrine is true, then God is so great that God defies all human imprisonment. We are given to believe that God is all-perfect in power, presence, and wisdom. Yet we insist on putting God in a box—a male box. Sojourner Truth marvelled as she continually experienced the expansiveness of God. She exclaimed, “God I didn’t know you were so big!!!” In the tradition of Negro Spiritual and Black Gospel music, “God is so high, you can’t get over, so low you can’t get under, so wide, you can’t get around, you must come in by the door”.

Coming in by the door means that you must meet God where God is, not via the tunnel of racist, sexist, classist, or any other oppressive ideology.

In his sermon “The Everywhereness of God,” Gardner C. Taylor asked with the Psalmist:

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depth, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139-7-10 NIV)

If God is everywhere, how can we contain God in words and concepts? Language which is exclusive limits human possibilities. Exclusive language is an attempt by human beings to limit and control other human beings. Further, and even more scandalous, such exclusive/oppressive language is the human’s attempt to limit and control God. Theological language is at best symbolic, as any language is symbolic. Any attempt to make it more than that borders on linguistic idolatry.

8 A sermon preached by Dr. Taylor in the ITC Chapel.
The task of womanist theologians is to recognize the power of language; to overcome the power of oppressive language; and to effect the [em]power[ment] of liberating language about humanity and about God.
Black Men Addressing Crime and Violence: The Maat Plan

The Cultural Studies Group at the State Correctional Institution at Dallas, Pennsylvania, recently conducted a scientific, yet passionate, workshop on the historical and contemporary factors that promote and perpetuate Black on Black crime and violence. Drawing on the results of our research and upon our experiences as Black men and prisoners, we present this decisive and comprehensive outline of a strategy aimed at addressing and solving this tragic problem of the African American community today. We call this strategy “The Maat Plan.”

The word “Maat” as used here, symbolizes the Kemetan precursor to the Yin Yang concept of duality. The term Maat is used to engender the idea of balance. It has to do with understanding the duality of truth; the forces and counter forces of cosmic reality; the balance of opposites. It is used here as an ancient African concept that stresses the acceptance of collective responsibility as a coun-

*The Cultural Studies Group at the State Correctional Institution at Dallas, Pa., is advised by the Reverend George McMillan, a graduate of Colgate Rochester Divinity School and an A.M.E. minister. He is Director of the Institutional Chaplaincy Program at the Correctional Institution at Retreat, Hunlock Creek, Pa., and Chaplain at the Correctional Institution in Dallas. He writes:

Hotep! (meaning “Peace, my brothers!”) is what I say in opening the Cultural Awareness Group that meets once a week at Dallas. We study African American literature, listen to audio tapes of Black scholars, and watch video lectures by scholars and activists. We have more than sixty inmates involved in the program. At one of our sessions a brother said to me, “We who have committed crime should know how to solve it.” This document was written by a committee and represents solutions that the brothers came up with. I join them in the hope that those who read this plan will put its ideas into practice. The survival of the Black male may depend on it.
terpoise to the tendency to blame others. Although we recognize the importance of locating and identifying the faults in the environment and addressing them, we believe that this needs to be balanced by finding and addressing flaws in our own strategies. We believe that when one is drifting off course it is far more practical to attempt to adjust the sails on one’s boat than to attempt to change the direction of the wind!

Through the use of the Maat concept we hope to bring to mind the duality in life, and need for balance and harmony in all existence. Introspection is the practical precursor, and natural counterbalance to circumspection. As incarcerated Black men, we believe that in recent years enormous energy has been spent assessing and addressing the role that others have played in our descent. Although we do not wish to down-play that role, we believe that this type of discussion about the present crisis affecting young Black males, usually generates more heat than light.

The Maat concept recognizes that balance is necessary. We believe that in order to achieve balance, we as a community must develop and execute a plan of action for ourselves based on what we need and what we, in fact, are able and willing to do. This will balance our tendency to look for help from others as we have done so often in the past.

We pray that the eight point plan offered in this document developed over a period of several months in our Cultural Studies Group will aid us, and our families and friends who consider it, in achieving the balanced approach essential for reaching our individual and collective goals. We believe that it will help our brothers, especially our younger brothers—both those on the inside and those who are still outside of these walls.

**Employment**

Full and meaningful employment is required to raise the
quality and value of life in the Black community. The lure of crime is often irresistible when our youth measure the promise of immediate gratification against the reality of poverty and unemployment among adults writhing in the throes of misery and substance abuse. Furthermore, if the incentive to get an education is the promise of future employment, it logically follows that pervasive unemployment leads to a lack of respect for formal education and for those who represent it. Consequently, the violence and crime that plagues our communities has overflowed into the disrespected educational system, turning the learning environment into a battle ground where students and teachers cannot help but be suspicious and distrustful of each other. The result is massive under-education and large scale unemployment among young Black men.

To begin to put the Black community back to work, we must employ entrepreneurial strategies wherein we organize locally for the purpose of employing ourselves and developing political strategies that we seek to implement nationally to create employment. Those industries that exploit our consumer status and yet refuse to employ us in respectable numbers and in respected positions, must be held accountable. They must be influenced to locate industries in the places where we live. They must provide jobs for us and decision-making positions that respect for our patronage warrants.

Only if our community members are employed will our communities be more economically and socially stable. In the past organizations like “Operation Push” used the boycott effectively to demonstrate the consumer power of the Black community to confront industries owned and operated by those outside of that community. However, the token appointments that we have traditionally settled for are not enough to compensate for the billions of dollars we spend. We need to change the focus of our objectives from appointments for a few, to having industries developed where we live that will provide jobs for the masses of the so-called underclass
that needs them most. This approach will not only provide jobs that can re-stabilize our family structure and community, but also make available to us those manufacturing skills and technologies required in an advanced society. Employment builds self-esteem and discipline. It raises the quality and value of our lives and that is the beginning of enabling us to appreciate, respect, and value the lives of others.

**Self-Reliance**

We realize that our future lies chiefly in our own hands. We know that neither institutions nor friends can make a race stand up unless that race has under it the strength of its own foundation. Races, like individuals, must stand or fall by their own merit. To fully succeed they must practice the virtues of self-reliance, self-respect, industry, perseverance, and economy.

The Black community in America is a community that possesses all the components of power and self-reliance, yet has failed to fulfill its promise because of its inability to organize its resources to promote and protect its own interests. If organized correctly we are perfectly capable of employing our own, enforcing order in our own communities, educating our own children and adults, endorsing and holding accountable our leaders, and controlling our own independent political party.

The power of organization is probably best exemplified by the current status of the Jewish community in this country. Despite even smaller numbers than the African American community, Jews manage to influence and, some would say, control many of the most influential institutions of this country. It is our conviction that the African American community has at least equal, if not greater potential in this respect. Fulfillment of this potential would enable us to enter into alliances with other communities, nationally and internationally, from a position of strength that demands respect.
If we were properly organized there are many things that we are victimized by today that would be within our power to prevent. For example, politicians who solicit our vote and then abandon our interests would do so not only at the peril of a lost election campaign, but at risk of the ruin of their whole careers! How? By the fact that Black people would not just be organized at election time, but organization would be an inseparable extension of our culture, and political solidarity would promote and enforce our interests full time.

Not until the Black community organizes and makes an effort to promote and defend its interests nationally, locally, and globally, will it cease being the door mat of free enterprise capitalism and America's favorite victim.

Community Awareness

Malcolm X stated that, “the Black community tends to confuse its methods with its objectives.” The struggle is not for upward social mobility, civil rights, or more Black elected officials. These are all means toward the end of the human recognition that we all aspire to as human beings. However, when we lose sight of the ends, the methods or means, instead of being vehicles of empowerment and human recognition, become divisive forces that cause us to compete against each other for status and recognition. This competition has created divisions, antagonisms, and hostilities between members of our community who forget that we cannot achieve our objectives without each other.

We do not have the luxury of dividing Muslims from Christians, integrationists from nationalists, the young from the elderly, men from women, college educated from the uneducated, or prisoners from civilians. The awareness of community that engenders unity is a prerequisite to our survival and collective well-being in America. Moreover, to prevent divisions and self-defeating con-
flicts, we need to organize workshops locally to promote political and cultural education. We must initiate community awareness campaigns nationally, (perhaps utilizing our power in the entertainment industry), in order to raise the awareness of the Black community of our common objectives. This, in turn, will better help us to subordinate our trivial individual differences in pursuit of our common objectives.

**Criminal Justice Reform**

In “The Crisis of Black Sexual Politics,” by Nathan and Julia Hare, statistics are presented that warn us that if the current rate continues, by the year 2000, seventy percent of all Black men will either be in prison, dead, or under the influence of alcohol and drug addiction. With seventy percent of our men missing in action, who will marry our daughters? Who will cement the character and provide the role models for our sons? How will we promote community struggle, stabilize the family, and propagate the race without our men?

Currently, more than 700,000 Black men are imprisoned throughout the United States. Twenty-three percent of the total Black male population between ages 20 and 29 is in jail—almost one in four! This intolerable situation demands that Black organizations and concerned members of our community reach out to these casualties of war and exercise a direct influence upon the way they return to our communities once they have been released from prison.

Many of these brothers are the victims of neglect and criminal circumstances in their environment. After being arrested they had less than adequate legal representation and little or no knowledge of the judicial process. Given these factors it is not surprising that statistics show that we are punished disproportionately in comparison to our Euro-American counterparts who come before the
courts with the same charges and similar arrest histories. The obvious injustice of this situation has led many prisoners, and social scientists as well, to the conclusion that though we are convicted of crimes, we are sentenced for being Black! The statistic that though we make up only twelve percent of the general population in this country, we are fifty percent of the prison population, stands as an undeniable support for this argument. The lynching that used to take place in the backwoods of Southern states is now being practiced through the judicial system of America. Any sincere effort, therefore, to redeem our communities must include a strategy of criminal justice reform to save our men from this institutionalized violence that is nothing less than a form of high tech lynching.

**Alliance of Religious Organizations Toward Common Goals**

The Religious Community has always been a morally stabilizing force within the Black community. It has been the platform from which we have launched some of our most effective movements and organizations, including the civil rights movement, the Nation of Islam, Deacons for Defense, SCLC, and many other organizations grounded in belief in God and religious activism.

The Black community today finds itself in a crisis as severe as any we have ever experienced, yet our Religious Community has failed to come together to provide the platform and leadership necessary to harness the community’s collective will and mobilize the masses toward solutions.

The problems that we face today must be addressed not only from civic, social, and political perspectives, but from moral and spiritual insights as well. If the role of religion is indeed to bring people back to God (re-legion), then the religious community must recognize the role that an unjust society plays in keeping people from God, and the concomitant role that religious organizations must play in shaping the good society. The shaping of society into
a place where desirable behaviors are encouraged, supported, and rewarded, benefits the African American community in general and the Religious Community in particular. Therefore, we must realize the failure of churches and mosques to work together as a strategic and organized unit with the purpose of rehabilitating society, in light of all of the political, social and economic clout held today by organized religion, is a serious indictment of our resolve as a religious people.

Our prisons, hospitals, and street corners are filled with young brothers driven to crime, immorality, and self-destruction by social circumstances that an organized and determined religious community should and could have addressed. The fact that some of us have managed to minimize the negative affect of society in our lives, should be used as an example of God's compassion rather than as a club with which to beat down less fortunate brothers. There—in those prison cells or on those street corners, but for the grace of God, go each of us, and will go each of us and our children, unless we begin to truly demonstrate love for one another by moving out to protect and serve one another. Every church, mosque, synagogue, and religious family, must take responsibility for monitoring, parenting, advising, and protecting its community. The Religious Community, unified by oneness under God, must set the proper example by putting aside differences and working collectively, utilizing both the power of numbers and the power of God.

Accountability

Just as we applaud the efforts of those who sacrifice and display dedication to our struggle to uplift ourselves as a people, we must be equally swift and convincing in condemning those who betray us and attempt to undermine our efforts. Strategies must be devised to hold the middle class and professionals accountable to their community's efforts to heal and develop itself.
Obviously, we all make mistakes and none of us perfectly upholds his responsibility as a member of a struggling community. However, our scholars and experts have identified some behaviors that are so injurious to the welfare of our community that they must, when exposed, be considered crimes, and be responded to with just punishment.

The objective of this strategy would be for all members of the African community here in North America, to recognize our inter-connectedness and realize that we are family, even if it requires coercive sanctions to make that happen.

We can no longer afford to make excuses for incompetent and traitorous conduct. Misbehavior can be minimized by organizing workshops to raise the awareness of our entire community. Simultaneously, we have to organize “culture classes” to reinforce the standards of conduct and commitment that we expect from each other. All of us, especially our leaders, need to be held strictly accountable to the community.

Family Structures

We turn finally to Maat and the Black family. Considering that the family is the basic cornerstone institution of any people, traditional cultural values suggest that any effort to raise the quality of life and struggle of a people will have to put the family first. This is true also with the Maat Plan, yet for this reason we address the family last. It is the strategic foundation upon which everything else rests.

The Maat plan recognizes that the Black family’s decimated state is the result of the overall neglect, deprivation, and economic alienation of the Black community. It will take, therefore, the combined effort of all of the previous strategies, as well as the support of all our institutions and organizations, to salvage the family, re-infusing it with its historic cultural value and placing it again at the cen-
ter of our culture and struggle.

The Maat Plan for re-establishing the family as our basic institution makes provision for Black male role models, by means of the extended family tradition, to be available to families that lack viable Black male role models. The same provision needs to be made for female role models where they are needed.

We will also have to develop programs of economic subsistence geared to the whole family and organized in a way that encourages collective work and responsibility, as well as family loyalty. As previously stated, the family is our primary and basic institution. Therefore, how we inter-relate with and view our responsibilities to people is more often than not determined by our experiences in the family. To put the people first, we must again put the family first!

Conclusion

We want to stress once again the need for a balanced approach, a MAAT approach. We view Black crime and violence as a problem in its own right, but also as a symptom of a greater problem. In seeking solutions we must address our own inconsistencies, as well as the negative influences of others. There are some people who are profiting from our misfortunes. We must analyze relationships between community members, social institutions, and governmental institutions in order to better understand who is helping and who is hindering us. Where conflicts of interests are found, we must address them.

The balance that we are seeking will come from lessening our excessive and misguided preoccupation with external influences, and concentrate more on our inner selves. We must learn right, and then do right. We must look to the God within us as the ultimate source of motivation, courage, knowledge, and strength. We must then move out to do God’s work, realizing that as a means
to help us understand and change our environment, God gave us the ability to study and the power of prayer. And to help make prayer and study work, God gave us each other. May God bless us all with the understanding necessary to acquire freedom and justice for Black men today and, in the days to come, for Black people everywhere.

Works Consulted By the Group and Recommended For Study

Akbar, Na’im. *From Miseducation to Education*.
Amen I, Ra Un Nefer. *Metu Neter* and Africentric Spiritual Union.
Azibo. *Liberation Theology*.
ben-Jochannan, Yosef. *Blackman of the Nile and His Family*.
Carmichael, Stokely and Charles Hamilton. *Black Power*.
Cleage, Albert. *The Black Messiah* and other works.
Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*.
Garvey, Marcus. *Philosophy and Opinions*.
Hare, Nathan and Julia. *The Endangered Black Family*.
Kunjufu, Jawaanza. *Black Economics* and other works.
Madhubuti, Haki. *From Plan to Planet, Black Men, Obsolete, Single, and Dangerous and Enemies: The Clash of Races*.
Malcolm X. “The Ballot or the Bullet.”
Marable, Manning. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*.
West, Cornel. *Race Matters*.
Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.
Wilson, Amos. *Black on Black Violence*.
Wright, Bruce. *Black Robes, White Justice*. 
The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Women’s Ordination Controversy, 1898-1900: A Case Study on the Value of Racial Inclusivity in Religious Studies

In recent decades the discipline of religion and others have been called upon to be more inclusive or multicultural in their approach to both teaching and research. An ever increasing number of scholars from various racial, ethnic, geographical, and gender backgrounds or identities have posed daring new questions for what was once practically male, Eurocentric scholarship. To be sure, these new endeavors have occasioned a great deal of pain for many accustomed to the status quo. There have been many charges of excesses leveled against the newer inclusive scholarship and scholars that in some instances rival the very real, demonstrable excesses of the older approach. But this new research has brought all of us to a clearer understanding of our respective disciplines. We have found, for example, that explorations into African American religious history have clarified our understanding of American religious history in general. How can we truly claim to understand the rise, development, spread, and impact of American evangelicalism without comprehending the leadership and participation of African Americans in that enterprise? So, not only does a study of African American religion complete the picture from the perspective of inclusivity; it also illumines the general portrait of American religi-

*Sandy D. Martin is a professor of religious history at The University of Georgia in Athens and Book Review Editor of the JITC. This article is for the most part a reproduction of a presidential address delivered to the Southeastern Region of the American Academy of Religion, March 1994. In addition, this material is excerpted from a biography of the AMEZ Bishop James Walker Hood (1831-1918) to be published by The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.
gion. This same principle can be employed across the various fields and subfields of religious study regarding the utility of racial and cultural inclusivity.

This article examines one specific area, the controversy within the black AME Zion Church over women’s ordination during the 1898-1900 period, to demonstrate not only the theological vitality of Black Christians at the turn of the twentieth century, but also to show the interconnectedness of all American religion, Black and nonBlack. In my own research I have attempted to answer the general question: how do people who experience marginalization, ostracism, oppression, and exclusion utilize their religion as a tool to achieve political, economic, social, and even religious freedom? A larger and related question is: what role has religion played in efforts to effect socio-economic and political reform, whether from the perspective of the targets of mistreatment, their sympathizers outside a given group, or those hostile to or grossly indifferent to the yearning of people to be free.

The following pages will demonstrate that black Christians, while deeply and most profoundly concerned with socio-economic, political issues relating to race, also wrestled with issues not necessarily race specific in character. While I suspect most of the mainline American Christian denominations, along with Reform and Conservative Judaism, have by now given an official “yes” answer to the question of gender equity in religious circles, practical challenges and problems connected with the full implementation of gender equity await final resolution. Some denominations have witnessed secessions from their ranks, if not over the woman’s ordination issue solely or principally, then certainly that issue combined with others. Furthermore, there are still large bodies of Christians, indeed those representing the majority of worldwide Christendom, that have not even given an official “yes” reply to the issue of gender equity.¹ Those groups that have embraced women’s ordination

¹This is particularly true of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.
mainly have done so within the last three or four decades. I am speaking of mainline Christian denominations since I am aware that there are many smaller groups, particularly within the Pentecostal-Holiness tradition, that have recognized female equity in religious leadership for some time.

It may surprise many of us to learn that some American denominations wrestled with the issue of women’s ordination and full equity in the church during the 1860-1920 era. The Methodist Protestant Church, a group that seceded from the Methodist Episcopal Church, later United Methodist, in the early nineteenth century took a bold step toward female equity. One annual conference of the denomination officially ordained women ministers. While the larger body did not follow that path, it did not repudiate or seek to invalidate the actions of that annual conference. In 1885 Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (not AME Zion) ordained Sarah A. Hughes as deacon, but that action was later invalidated by the general church, not to mention a refusal to recognize women at the highest ministerial rank of elder. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, therefore, holds the distinction as the only mainline church, black or non-black, that recognized complete gender equity in religious circles as early as 1900. While women might have receive “full” ordination to the ministry in certain congregations or subdivisions of other denominations, the AMEZ is the only mainline Christian body of which I am aware that officially recognized women’s ordination throughout the denomination.²

The Nature of the Controversy

The controversy that rocked the AME Zion Church during the 1898-1900 years began with the ordination of the Reverend Mrs. Mary J. Small to the order of elder by Bishop Calvin C. Pettey upon recommendation of the Philadelphia and Baltimore Annual Conference in 1898. Previously, women had been granted preaching license and ordained as deacons in Zion. But the ordination of a woman to the highest level of ministry, the eldership, with authority to pastor churches, administer the sacraments, and become candidates for the bishopric, was a novel step for Zion as well as for most other Christian denominations during this era. The central question in the debate was not the character or educational qualifications of the Reverend Small but the legitimacy of ordaining women to the ministry. The broader issue was the complete equality of women in all spheres of church life.

There were several major responses to the ordination of Small: complete opposition and a demand that the General Conference, the highest judicatory in the connection, rescind the ordination, as exemplified by the Reverend S. A. Chambers; full support of women's equality in all aspects of church life, including eldership, as illustrated by Bishop John B. Small; moderate opposition that strongly denied the religious basis for ordination of women but recognized that denominational law as currently written gave Small the right to seek ordination and thus tended not to push for nullification of her ordination by the General Conference, as depicted by Elder John W. Smith and layperson B. F. Grant; and there were a number of responses from women in support of the Reverend Mrs. Small, as represented by Mrs. Sarah Pettey and others. Based upon materials available to me, women took little direct part in the debate, that is, as it unfolded in the denominational paper, The Star of Zion. Perhaps this scarcity of input revolves round the ministerial context of the debate. I would also imagine that many women
were also firm adherents of the traditionalist camp, some of whom perhaps held to the conviction that women should not participate in such publicly controversial and even acrimonious displays. In this article we shall examine each of the above positions and close with an analysis of the resolution of the debate and its significance. Both sides in the controversy hailed the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice and appealed to it to support their respective positions. It was the interpretive principle that differed. The progressives (i.e., regarding this issue) focused on those passages that supported gender equity; the conservatives or traditionalists (again, regarding this issue) appealed to those passages that justified or argued the subordination of women to men. The progressives defended their position of support for women’s ordination along a number of lines. First, they emphasized biblical passages pointing to gender equity in principle and concrete instances of women’s leadership in the Old and New Testaments. Second, they downplayed those biblical passages that counseled the subordination of women by claiming that they spoke to specific situations and particular set of problems that no longer applied or the proscriptions had been subsequently invalidated in Scripture. Third, they used the argument of “historical progressivism,” that history, inspired by the principles of the Bible and the Christian faith, has progressively unfolded greater truths and freedoms. Thus, what might have been unthinkable, even to Christ’s first century disciples, are much clearer and acceptable to his followers in later epochs. Fourth, from a practical point of view, the current church required the labors of women ministers to offset the dereliction of duty by so many male ministers. For the sake of space, we might succinctly state that the opponents of women’s ordination or the traditionalists either denied each of the above or insisted that none of them should be employed to circumvent biblical and church traditions that prohibited women’s ordination as elders. Occasionally, a traditionalist would put
forth an argument that women were not physically capable of enduring the physical strain associated with the job of pastors, or that a wife’s ordination might cause disharmony in the marital relationship, or that women parishioners would not submit to the pastoral authority of females as they would to that of males. But these latter arguments were clearly secondary to their insistence that the Bible and church tradition unambiguously opposed ordination of women to roles where they would exercise authority over men.

At the center of the controversy was Mary Julia Blair Small (1850-1945). A native of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Small was converted on October 26, 1873, at the age of twenty-three, three years after she had wedded the elder (later Bishop) John B. Small. From her childhood Mrs. Small envisioned herself as a foreign missionary, a dream that was partly realized when her husband became bishop with specially assigned jurisdiction over the African churches. Mrs. Small had not always approved of women preachers and did not surrender to the call to preach until January 21, 1892, the year John E. Price, a presiding elder in the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference, granted her preaching license. Three years later Bishop Alexander Walters ordained her deacon. In 1898 Mrs. Small received ordination as elder. A vigorous evangelist, Small was a modest woman of sterling character, as attested by all the parties of the debate. By 1898 she had held many evangelistic gatherings in places of the northeast such as Rochester, Brooklyn, and various cities and towns in Pennsylvania. In 1912 she became the third president of the Woman’s Home and Foreign Mission Society, an office she held until 1916. She died in 1945, one month shy of 95 years of age.3

Before examining this debate, the reader might note that the

Reverend Mrs. Julia Foote received ordination to elder in November 1900 from Bishop Alexander Walters of the New Jersey Annual Conference just prior to her death. It is important to note that Foote, Small, and other women, such as Florence Randolph, were already active ministers prior to ordination. Whether it was a political move to make Small, the wife of a current bishop, the first of these women to be ordained elder is unknown. Quite possibly, the bishops reasoned that a bishop’s wife might escape heavy criticism and thus pave the way for other women to receive elder’s orders. But neither her spousal relationship nor possible church politics should obscure the reality that Small was in fact a bona fide minister who had already played a great role in missionary work for the connection.

**S. A. Chambers Opposes the Ordination**

One of the earliest respondents to Small’s ordination was the Reverend S. A. Chambers of Rock Hill, South Carolina, and we shall employ his arguments as representative of the traditionalist camp. Chambers was an excellent example of that type of ministers who came out unapologetically and clearly against the ordination of women to eldership. In his June 16, 1898 front page article in the *Star*, Chambers claimed that he was neither prejudiced against women nor fearful of ministerial rivalry from them. He simply wished to uphold biblical authority. He called for the General Conference to nullify the actions in the Small case because the annual conference had transcended its authority. Chambers proceeded to outline his belief that the Bible, the only authority for the church, offered no warrant for women’s ordination, claiming neither Christ nor the Apostles had commissioned women to engage in the ministry. The Rock Hill minister was quite clear that women’s

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4 *Star*, June 16, 1898, p. 1.
church work was unequal in authority to that of men.

Soon, the minister warned, women will become “pastors, presiding elders and Bishops.” He was absolutely firm in his total rejection of “this petticoat ministry.” “I as much doubt a woman’s call to the ministry as I do my ability to fly.”

It seems difficult to abstain from reading not only a biblical opposition to women’s ministry but perhaps even a degree of misogyny in Chambers’s statements. Given the substance and tone of Chambers’s argument, even some opponents of women’s ordination might have found themselves agreeing with Bishop Small’s interpretation of some ordination critics. “There are those who attempt to crush others with the word of God — and the way some men talk of women, we are sorry for their mothers, and pity their wives.”

Within a few weeks Chambers found himself responding to a number of arguments from the Reverend J. H. Gilmer, Jr., of Booneville, North Carolina, a strong proponent of women’s ordination. He found ridiculous Gilmer’s contention that woman’s subordination to man had been “probationary,” until greater truth was received by the church, and puzzled over the source for such a perspective. Whereas Gilmer might have read the Genesis account of women’s subordination after the Fall as a prediction, not a curse, Chambers clearly saw it as the latter. If that curse was to be obliterated, said Chambers, only God, not humanity should do it. The South Carolina minister reminded his opponent that the Bible spoke of man as the head of woman, which meant that man obviously was superior to woman in the “social,” “business,” and the religious facets of life. Chambers regarded Gilmer’s contention — that even Christ had not revealed the whole truth to the disciples because of their inability to receive the truth — as so non-sensical that he dismissed it abruptly, not bothering to prepare a detailed

5Ibid.
6Star, August 18, 1898, p. 1.
7Star, June 30, 1898, p. 5.
8Star, July 21, 1898, p. 5.
response. 9

Chambers attacked with equal relish Gilmer’s argument that the Apostle Paul had ordained women (cf. Romans, 16th Chapter). These women, wrote the minister, had helped Paul in local church work, as many conscientious women were currently doing. But to claim that the women in Rome had been ordained was going too far. Paul did not engage in “double dealing.” What he commanded, he also practiced: women must not preach or legislate in the church. Chambers closed his article by daring Gilmer to respond with an argument more carefully crafted and effective.10

Between Gilmer’s first article and Chamber’s response, another clergyperson had offered his strong support for women’s ordination in the pages of the Star, the Reverend B. J. Bolding of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.11 While Bolding’s article depicted a fascinating view of history as progressively unfolding in favor of greater rights for women, it largely failed to deal with the issues that were most significant for the traditionalists, those relating to biblical authority. In his reply, Chambers kept the discussion on traditionalists’ territory.12 First, Chambers correctly observed that his critic had offered no biblical authority as proof for his position. Second, wrote Chambers, to say that the Methodist founder John Wesley, while commissioning lay women preachers, refused to ordain them because he was a “strict Churchman” was a very good point — for Chambers’s argument, not Bolding’s! So, was Bolding saying that the leaders of Zion who endorsed women’s ordination were not strict churchmen, that they were following paths not plainly warranted by scripture? As for Bolding’s charge that women preachers might be needed because so many male ministers had

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Star, July 7, 1898, p. 3.
12 Star, July 28, 1898, p. 2.
been derelict in their duties, Chambers responded that there was no such necessity for women preachers during the time of Wesley or in 1898, and women preachers were “becoming more and more offensive every day.”

Finally, Chambers responded to Bolding’s claim that a General Conference had no right to nullify the ordination of an annual conference made in consonance with the church discipline. Since the Bible is the supreme and only authority in matters of Christian faith and practice, the General Conference certainly had the right to abrogate an action taken in direct opposition to biblical teachings. The Bible, he said, was a divine and eternally authoritative book, not a human one. To say that the Bible is incomplete and insufficient, that its counsels must be enlarged upon with other sources, is to question the sufficiency and sovereignty of God. In other words, traditionalists were claiming that any imperfection in the Bible rendered belief in an all sovereign God untenable or at least suspect. To ordain women as elders was contradicting the Bible and thus usurping God’s authority. Securing support from traditionalist minded Zionites would require more detailed, biblically-based arguments.

Bishop Small Defends the Ordination

Mary J. Small during much of the 1898 debate was ill or recuperating. Perhaps that explains the absence of any response on her part that I have been able to locate. Her husband, however, the Reverend Bishop John Bryan Small (1845-1905), came vigorously to her defense. Serving as bishop for less than nine years, Small made quite an impact upon the church. Born in Barbados, then a West Indies colony of Great Britain, Small, traveling to England in 1871, stopped in the United States and joined the AMEZ denomination. Ordained a deacon in 1872 and elder in 1873, Small also served as presiding elder in the New England and the Philadelphia
and Baltimore Conferences. In May 1896, Small was elevated to the bishopric. Thus, when this controversy arose, Small had served in the episcopacy for little more than two years. Small was keenly interested in African missions and held distinction as a great thinker, writer, and theologian in Zion. Bishop Small's defense of Mary Small included the outrage of a husband whose virtuous wife had been or was being theologically and ecclesiastically "violated" by some of her male colleagues in the ministry. As early as June 1898 Bishop Small boldly declared that he had been patient and forbearing long enough. His letter to the Star focused upon two major outrages. First, Elder Small had been effectively excommunicated from her church by one of the presiding elders of the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference, the Reverend W. H. Snowden, when he ruled that she was not a member of the York, Pennsylvania church or any particular church since she had been granted a missionary certificate. Though Snowden denied that his decision related to the ordination matter, many contemporary observers made that connection. Second, Elder Small had endured unnecessary and unfair treatment regarding her ordination. She had served as deacon for four, rather than the normal two, years prior to ordination as elder and had witnessed her ordination service delayed for two days despite her illness. Bishop Small made it clear that he demanded justice for his wife and would oppose those who mistreated her.

Bishop Small not only defended his wife's ordination on the grounds of church law, he also echoed other arguments made on behalf of women's ordination and provided the most in depth and continuous defense of women's ordination to appear in the Star. In

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13Walls, Zion, pp. 586-587; and Bradley, History, II, p. 388.
14Star, June 16, 1898, p. 6.
15Star, June 16, 1898, p. 6 and September 1, 1898, p. 6. Also see Snowden's article in Star, July 28, 1898, p. 6.
the August 11, 1898 issue, Bishop Small made it clear that he considered the ordination of women to the ministry a serious step that had to be taken with due deliberation. Like other proponents, the prelate used the argument of historical progress. Christianity, he argued, worked to lift women from oppression. A naturalized American citizen, Small claimed that Americans’ love for the Gospel and the opportunities for women’s advancement were two things about the country that attracted him. Small argued that the Church must move beyond bigotry and “oppressive legislation” to embrace progress.

In the subsequent issue of the Star, Small dealt more specifically with the objections raised against women’s ordination. The bishop noted that at one time he too opposed women’s ministry but came to the conclusion that it was far better to accept the woman’s declaration of her call than to risk standing in the way of God. Subsequently, he came to a biblically based position that women’s ordination was indeed the will of God. First, Small dealt with words attributed to Paul, “I suffer not a women to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to [learn] in silence.” Using an argument often employed by proponents of women’s ordination, Small claimed these words constituted a “declaration,” a statement of Paul’s practice in particular situations, and not “an injunction” to be followed as a universal rule. Of course critics quickly noted that the biblical writer of these and related words (not the Apostle Paul, according to the consensus of critical scholarship) made no such distinction. Many interpreters, for and against women’s ordination, still consider statements found in places such as I Corinthians and I Timothy to have been intended as universal rules restricting religious leadership to males.

In the third installment of his defense, Small continued the

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16 Star, August 11, 1898, p. 1.
17 Star, August 18, 1898, p. 1. Small’s reply to the critics of Mrs. Small’s ordination is spread over at least three issues of the Star.
treatment of biblical passages attributed to Paul, particularly those in I Corinthians and I Timothy. His argument in this issue was a bit weightier. Small claimed that if one read these words as injunctions rather than declarations for particular circumstances, then the church should not permit women to speak in any context. A literal reading of those words as injunctions would render all women’s prayer, speaking, and witnessing for Christ in the Church unacceptable. Such a censure of women’s participation would be counterproductive to the mission of evangelism. This was a weighty argument in part because many opponents of women’s ordination as elders or even as deacons did favor licensing women for missionary preaching, even when this preaching addressed gender mixed audiences or congregations. Surely such activities were not learning in silence and submission!

Bryan continued his argument. Certainly the great Apostle could not have meant women’s silence as a literal, universal injunction. Had the Apostle himself not in a number of places, such as Philippians 4:3, lauded women as coworkers, “fellow laborers,” as “yokefellow[s]”? One acting as a co-laborer with the Apostle could not be one acting in silence. Not only did Paul commend certain women leaders but called upon others to assist them in their endeavors. What were the reasons for “Paul’s” words regarding women’s silence in the church, according to Small? The bishop pointed out that the apostle mainly missionized Gentiles, including the Greeks. It was a part of the Greek polytheistic traditions that gods would be attracted to women in the temples. This led to ritual prostitution, a practice clearly at variance with Christianity.

Some Greek husbands, to protect their wives from the desires of deities, required their wives to wear veils and a servant to accompany them. When Paul came to Corinth, he found two classes of

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19Ibid, p. 2.
women: one, educated and capable of preaching, but immoral; the other having moral character but lacking preaching abilities. No wonder, given such circumstances, Paul declared that women should remain silent so that neither class would corrupt the faith. He would not write such declarations to the church at Philippi because women were of higher moral character. If such was the case, a critic might wonder, why would “Paul” not counsel that women remain silent until they learned how to exercise leadership gifts? In addition, the passage in I Timothy clearly related women’s exclusion from religious leadership to the will of God based upon the disobedience of the first woman, Eve. Biblical traditionalists did not find this argument persuasive.

But Small pursued a line of argument of greater substance relative to the possibility of a persuasive appeal to the traditionalist camp. He posited that prophet/esses were superior to preachers. The latter “preaches the word of God as it passed through other hands, and sometimes with a considerable [amount?] of his own views.” The prophet/ess on the other hand, “receives the unadulterated word from the mouth of God, and delivers it to the people. All prophets, therefore, are preachers; but all preachers are not prophets. Surely the place of a prophet must be higher than that of a preacher unordained or ordained.” Having stated this premise, Small canvassed both the Old Testament and New Testament, identifying women prophets or prophetesses.

Small cited the following prophetesses: Miriam, the sister of Aaron (and Moses), who at the Red Sea led women in rejoicing and praising God through inspired words; Deborah, who exercised considerable authority and direction over men; Huldah, the interpreter of the newly discovered book of the Law in II Kings 22; and Anna, who prophesied concerning the child Jesus. The bishop

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20 Ibid, p. 5.
21 Ibid, p. 5.
called attention to the four prophesying daughters in Philippi in Acts and the women in the Gospels who boldly carried the first news of Christ's resurrection back to the disciples. The bishop, furthermore, claimed that women in biblical times had received ordination. He called attention to the deacon(ess) Phoebe in Romans and Priscilla in Acts who actually instructed "an eloquent Gospel preacher." It was clear to Small that the Bible did not forbid ordination of women, that any declarations to that effect referred only to specific, local situations dealing with particular sets of circumstances.22

The Moderate Opposition and Women Defenders of Small

Some Zionites opposed women's ordination in principle but believed that Mrs. Small had been legitimately ordained as elder under denominational law. While the Reverend and future bishop John W. Smith, editor of the denominational Star, vigorously opposed women's ordination, he did not regard the specific ordination of the Reverend Mrs. Small as contrary to church discipline and did not foresee the General Conference convening in 1900 as likely overturning it.23 Indeed, Smith did not blame Small for the ordination. She had merely exercised her right under the connectional discipline that by eliminating "male" had granted women absolute equality in all facets of church life. Nor would it be legally proper to abrogate her ordination since church law had permitted it. Assuming that the bishops did not buck the general consensus of the Zion Church and ordain another woman elder prior to the General Convention in 1900, Smith felt confident that Mrs. Small would "be the first and the last woman elder made by Zion Connection." He closed his article stating that the church, when eliminating the word "male" from its church law, had no intention

22 Star, September 1, 1898, p. 6.
23 Star, August 8, 1898, p. 4.
of ordaining female elders. This great ambition on the part of the proponents of women's ordination to make history might one day prove to be a terrible mistake, he claimed.24

This opposition-in-principle-but-support-as-legal-right position was shared by others in the Zion denomination. The Reverend F. M. Jacobs, a college graduate, actually appeared to chastise many current opponents of Small's ordination, claiming that some ministers had been so desirous of being the most progressive Methodist connection regarding women's rights that, contrary to the sound warning they had received at the time, they proceeded to amend the discipline in the 1870s in such a way that women gained absolute equality and the opportunity to seek any office in the church, including elder or even bishop. Now some of these same individuals were fighting a fait accompli when their efforts might have been more effectively employed to defeat the original proposal.25

B. F. Grant, layperson in the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference, offered a perspective that suggested some residue of resentment by the male laity against the male clergy dating back some years surrounding the issue of women's rights in the church. This layperson claimed that as a delegate to the 1898 annual conference he voted in favor of Small's ordination, not because he favored the idea in principle, but because there was no basis in denominational law to vote against Small. Grant had no sympathy for the clergy critics of Small's ordination, who quite enthusiastically had eliminated "male" and "female" from the church discipline, thus granting women equal rights, even more than "the great Methodist Episcopal Church." Given the church law and the fact that Small had clearly met the requirements, she merely requested what was her right. Grant noted with apparent glee that a number of male ministers were greatly upset over Small's ordination and suggested that these ministers were quite willing to award

24Ibid.
women equity as long as it applied only to lay men and not to clergy men. What the male ministers had planned for the lay men had now come back upon them.  

Not only did Bishop Small and other male clergy and some lay men come to the defense of Mrs. Small, but some women offered support for her in the pages of the denominational newspaper. In 1896 Mrs. Sarah E. C. Dudley Pettetey, wife of Bishop Pettetey, started a weekly “Woman’s Column” in the Star as a voice for the Woman’s Home and Foreign (now Overseas) Missionary Society, for which she had served as treasurer (1892-1896) and was current executive secretary. In her column in the June 23, 1898 issue of The Star of Zion, Mrs. Pettetey did not directly join the debate over Small’s ordination but hailed the connection as “progressive” regarding equal rights for women. Referring to the action of a previous General Conference that had eliminated gender descriptions from the discipline, Mrs. Pettetey, like other proponents of women’s ordination, praised the church for enlarging opportunities for women. Her article spelled out Small’s qualifications: her diaconate experience, eloquence and forcefulness, and “a most excellent record as an evangelist.”

Mrs. Carissa Betties in December 1898 offered strong words of support to Mrs. Small. She warned males not to oppose the will of God and encouraged the Reverend Small to remember that God had angels watching over God’s children. Betties exhorted Small, “You are right; go, and as you go, preach.” Male preachers who opposed her ordination had risen too late: Small had already been ordained according to church law. Reflecting the argument that women ministers were needed to perform ministries that some men left undone, Betties wrote to the men, “Let her alone; she is doing

26 Star, June 23, 1898, p. 6.
27 For biographical details about Sarah Pettetey, see Walls, Zion, 408-409, 413, 421.
28 Star, June 23, 1898, p. 5.
what you won't do." Nor did it matter that some male ministers subjected Small to name calling; her call to preach was more valid than that of some male preachers. "Some men heard a mule bray and said that God had called them to preach."\(^{29}\) The comments of the woman editor of the Tennessee newspaper, Bristol Ship, reprinted in the Star during the summer of 1898 offered a curious blend of theological conservatism, relative to women ministers, but a feminist commitment to women rights. While she did not support the idea of women's ordination or preaching, the unnamed editor was greatly disturbed by the attempt of many male opponents to suppress Mrs. Small's ambition, especially given her rights under the church discipline, and blamed most male opposition on "envy, jealousy and fear" of women's progress.\(^{30}\) The Bristol Ship editor insisted that women had the right to engage in the same vocational pursuits as their husbands. When the husbands were absent, wives should be able to step in. When the husbands were present, wives had the right to be companions. "...[A]nd as long as you brethren let the women kill themselves working for the preachers, you ought not let fear of their surpassing you cause you to oppose their preaching, if they so desire . . ." Besides, opposition to the ordination was coming too late since "Sister Small is already ordained. Ha, ha, ha!"\(^{31}\) By October 1898 the peak of controversial tension as reflected in newspaper debates had passed.

Zion's Resolution and An Assessment of the Ordination Debate

The ordination of women to the ministry during these years faced tough opposition. It is surprising that the Zion engaged the issue as much as it did. The only authority that most Protestants

\(^{29}\)Star, December 22, 1898, p. 6.

\(^{30}\)Reprinted in Star, August 11, 1898, p. 1.

\(^{31}\)Ibid.
claimed was Scripture. To contradict the scriptures, in their opinion, was to call into question the very sovereignty of God. It would appear that no conclusive argument could have been made supporting the ordination of women without abandoning the traditional perspective that the Bible was the absolute, infallible Word of God. Just as there were passages that plainly portrayed women in roles of active leadership alongside and sometimes superior to men, there were also passages that clearly counseled women's subordination. No amount of contextual explanations, then or now, could render these passages so ineffectual as to provide an indisputable argument favoring women's ordination. To convince fully the traditionalists that women were eligible for all aspects of ministry, one would have to convince them to abandon some significant portions of their biblical traditionalism, a change that adherents on neither side of the debate were prepared to take. Even in the 1990s historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation do not meet with universal favor among the traditionally religious populace, Zionite or otherwise. It would seem that the proponents of women's ordinations in those days were doomed to defeat.

But appearances can prove deceptive. At the 1900 General Conference the Reverend A. J. Rogers introduced a resolution that apparently opposed the ordination of women. Five days later, a Saturday, May 19, when the matter finally came before the Conference for consideration, the effort to outlaw the ordination of women went down to defeat, a development that I suspect caught even the supporters of women ordination by surprise. The Conference minutes provide no breakdown on the voting; thus, we have no way of knowing whether the margin of victory for the progressives was small or large. It is noteworthy that four bishops, including Small, made qualifying statements after the defeat of the recommendation against ordination. In sum, the episcopal comments underscored that all women ordinations hitherto had been carried out in accordance with church laws, that the female candi-
dates had been fully qualified. Furthermore, no one should receive ordination to elder in the future unless she or he was fully qualified according to stated specifications of church law.\(^{32}\) Perhaps these comments were made both to clarify the denomination’s position on the issue of ordination of women and to calm dissent, division, or fear about the decision that the connection had just taken. To be sure, the Conference did not pass a resolution with a ringing endorsement of female ordination, and undoubtedly women would continue to face discrimination in their ministerial endeavors. Nevertheless, the progressives on gender had won a large victory. The denomination had finally and officially approved women’s ordination to the orders of elder, consequently recognizing women’s equality in all aspects of church work, and had done so while avoiding a major schism or continuous acrimonious debates over the issue.

There are other indications of the connection’s move toward greater gender equity during this era. An observer of *The Star of Zion*, the denomination’s most prominent newspaper, will find that during the 1890s women began to play more active roles in its pages. For example, Sarah Pettey, who initiated a “Woman’s Column,” drew attention to women personalities and issues in both the religious and secular realms. At least one daughter of Hood, Margaret Hood Banks, wrote occasional articles on women personalities in the Bible. There were also some prominent female evangelists, such as the Reverend Dr. Florence Randolph, who continued to have impressive influence in the church. Senior Bishop James Walker Hood and other progressives on women issues, in addition, promoted the cause of women’s advancement in other areas of ecclesiastical life, including strong recommendations and support of women for certain key missionary offices in the church.

How do we account for the liberality of Hood, like-minded

\(^{32}\)Minutes, General Conference, AMEZ Church, 1900, pp. 56, 76.
Zion leaders, and the general connection to some extent regarding the ordination of women? First, there have been since the days of John Wesley some lay women preachers or missionaries in the various branches of Methodism: Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Methodist Protestant, and Union Church of African family. Though not officially designated elders, their ministerial tradition helped to custom at least some Methodists, including Zionites, of the possibility that women could receive the call to preach. Second, the AMEZ, compared to some other Methodist groups, had always granted a greater degree of freedom to its lay membership. One might wonder if this liberality toward the laity in general did not also nurture, wittingly or unwittingly, a liberality toward women in particular.

Finally, the period between the years 1865 and 1920 was an exciting era of women's activity in public life, both in the secular and the ecclesiastical realms, a fact that probably encouraged liberality within some quarters of the Zion. We might think immediately of women leadership and endeavors in groups such as women's clubs, Women's Christian Temperance Union, the suffrage movement, and the development of women's organizations focusing upon missions and humanitarian and civil work. There was even a Methodist precedent for the ordination of women to eldership by the Methodist Protestant Church, as noted in the introduction of this article.\textsuperscript{33} Zion's retains the distinction, however, as being the only major Methodist body recognizing complete gender equity within its membership.

**Conclusion**

The foregoing historical account of the AMEZ tumultuous controversy over women's ordination has intrinsic value simply in

revealing a largely unknown and ignored aspect of African American and American religious history. In addition, this account illustrates two important points. First, Black Christians did not meekly and unimaginatively mimic or follow the lead of their White counterparts. Indeed, here is one situation or incident among many where Black Christians pioneered and they did so on an issue not wholly race specific. Second and more to the main point of the article, this issue of women’s ordination reveals that, the uniqueness of the African American religious tradition notwithstanding, there are many issues, concerns, aspirations, and fears that transcend the color/ethnic/racial divide in American religion. Was this debate not in itself a capsule, case study of American religion in its struggle over gender equity — a struggle that many of us within the past ten to thirty years have witnessed in our respective denominations as well as in many of our own personal hearts, minds, and souls as we endeavored to move from yesterday to tomorrow? Do we not, thus, see the value of illumining the broader picture that emerges from an inclusive/multicultural approach not only regarding religion, but all academic disciplines?
Traditionally, men have been applauded for being more cerebral and less emotional than women. However, this socially acceptable view of non-emotionalism and cool-headedness has done a disservice to men by impeding the full development of an important part of their personality. More importantly, it can impact negatively on their interpersonal relationships, particularly with women.

African American males face the same contradictory pressures. On one hand, they see, hear, and aspire to achieve the dominant images of masculinity held out by the wider society. On the other hand, African American males have faced, directly or indirectly, the emasculating pressures perpetrated against them that prevent them from achieving the stereotypical images of masculinity.

In the 1960s Erik Erikson made this observation in his book *Childhood in Society*. In that book he cites the closed opportunities that many African Americans faced because they were systematically cut off from certain avenues through which they might achieve identity. Erikson pointed out that only three avenues of personhood were held out by society for African Americans.

Three identities are formed: (1) mammy’s oral-sensual “honey child”—tender, expressive, rhythmical; (2) the evil identity of the dirty, anal-sadistic, phallic-rapist “nigger”;

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and (3) the clean, anal-compulsive, restrained, friendly, but always sad “white man’s Negro.”

Romney Moseley also comments on the “negative identity” foisted upon black youth because of poverty, racism, narcotics, and unemployment. These social conditions result in many African American men being incarcerated. Thus, the “negative identity” is perpetuated. There is pressure from within the African American community as well as from wider society for African American men to act out the “negative identity.” Our society needs a scapegoat on which to blame its ills and today young African American males are being presented as the sacrifice.

One major concern of pastoral counseling with African American males is how to help them achieve wholeness by rejecting the “Sisyphus identity,” which can be viewed as the “negative identity.” The writer has encountered this Greek figure in two places that relate to Black males. The first was in a counseling session with an African American male more than five years ago. The second incident was in the docudrama “Murder without Motive: The Edmond Perry Story.” This was the story of an honor student from Harlem who had extraordinary promise being shot by an undercover policeman in the streets of Harlem in 1985. While attending an exclusive prep-school in New England, this young man encountered the myth of Sisyphus. He was struck by the fact that Sisyphus was condemned to roll a stone up a hill only to have the stone roll back down the hill when it almost reached its destination. This repetition took place endlessly. Edmond Perry commented in

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2 Ibid., p. 242.
6 This docudrama aired on NBC, January 6, 1992.
class one day that this seemed to be the destiny of many people in Harlem. He too was a victim of the Sisyphus mythology.

The writer is convinced that the Sisyphus mythology is the plot held out by wider society for African American males and females. There are covert and overt messages that push and pull African American males to adopt this role. Nevertheless, as we have been reminded by countless others, “We are not slaves.” Nor do we have to play roles that demean and subjugate us. The task facing pastoral counseling is to help African American males, as a special group needing help, to choose a different identity. The proposal here is to present a model of holism where African American males get in touch with both the masculine and feminine sides of their holistic identities. In so doing, we can find a basis for becoming whole persons who respond to the world from within rather than react to the pressures of the external world.

It is not the intention to further oppress African American women by a one-sided analysis of this problem that faces the African American community. African American men are not in any more danger than African American women. The pressure of the “negative identity” is there for every African American, male or female. Many of our women have given up successful careers because of oppressive harassment and the experience of being treated as if they embodied the negative identity. Rather than being responded to as if they were persons with gifts, graces, and abilities, the response to them was as if they had stolen their positions and were not qualified to serve in them. Regardless of their competence, they were treated as people who did not deserve to be where they were. Many eventually leave because they soon realize that their true competence will not be rewarded. Even the so-called “Whiteman’s Negro type” faces this kind of harassment.

7 Carolyn McCrary makes reference to this saying by Howard Thurman in her Interdependence as a Norm for Pastoral Counseling, STD Dissertation, Interdenominational Theological Center, 1989.
The focus of this essay is the African American male because the writer believes that his twenty-four years of pastoral counseling with them has something to offer in terms of a general theory. Consequently, the major theme sounded here is that true selfhood for the African American male requires tapping into the inner source of personhood that transcends wider societal images of masculinity.

There is a transcendent and spiritual source of personhood that can be accessed through pastoral counseling. This source of personhood can be discovered and appropriated by (1) exploring the racial and archetypal sources of African personhood in pre-history; (2) attending to the cultural and oral style by which African American males relate; (3) examining the stories and myths with which they identify; (4) editing negative plots with Bible stories and characters; (5) probing the importance of African American men developing the capacity to see the world through the eyes of the women who are close to them; (6) modelling the way feelings may be attended to through self-disclosure, and (7) developing the relational dimensions of the pastoral counseling episode through immediacy.

First of all, there is a theological assumption undergirding this discussion that needs to be spelled out. This assumption is that we are all created in the image of God, just as we are told in the creation story of Genesis 1:26. This image contains in it our infinite worth as creations of God. There is an impulse from within each of us to realize this given image of God that is in us. Pastoral counseling is one means to help African American men to claim their creature roots and their innermost spiritual source. It is in discovering this inner resource of identity through relationships with others and with God that we become full human beings.

It is in our spiritual relationship with God and with others that we arrive at our essential identity. Our essential identity is that we have within us a spark of divinity that we call God’s image. It is
in our relationship with God that we activate this image of God in us. This living in relationship to God is the essence of personhood, and this personhood is enhanced as we live in relationship to others.

**Racial and Archetypal Sources of Personhood In Africa**

A theme of this presentation is the recovery of the feminine side of the African American personality. This theme focuses on the African American male adopting the dominant images of masculinity and femininity as a reaction to prescribed identities offered by the wider culture. Of critical importance is the belief of many African American males that patriarchy is the only source of male identity permitted in the United States. The patriarchal aspirations of African American males further alienate them from the racial and archetypal sources of their identity.

Charles S. Finch III, a medical doctor and professor of medicine at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, examines the pre-history of matriarchy and patriarchy. Relying on twenty-one years of study of comparative religion, mythology, anthropology, archeology, and evolution, he posits that matriarchy undergirds virtually all culture in Africa. He bases this on an examination of Egyptian myths, language, and symbols. He demonstrates that patriarchy was an inevitable outgrowth of the development of human consciousness related to economic and social factors and that matriarchy lost ground because it was one-sided, all-consuming and unhealthy. Finch also believes that patriarchy today has also become all-consuming, one-sided, and unhealthy. Of particular

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8 This belief became obvious to me in a class where African American males preparing for the ministry attempted to get to the roots of their belief in patriarchy.


importance is his conclusion that Egypt and the rest of Africa avoided the split between matriarchy and patriarchy that dominated the rest of the world. He concludes that there was a creative reconciliation between matriarchy and patriarchy in lower cultures of the Nile. Patriarchy did not overcompensate for the abuses of matriarchy.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 110-111.}

The implication of Finch’s work is that the archetypal and racial source of African American manhood is found in the creative tension between matriarchy and patriarchy. This means that the racial and archetypal inheritance of African Americans is a creative synthesis between the masculine and feminine cultural dimensions. Overcompensating patriarchal postures on behalf of African American men is something contemporary. It was not part of the African past.

beliefs. Moreover, the literature reveals a healthy flexibility in performing roles in the family. This has enabled the African American family to survive many difficulties despite racism.

In some of the research conducted by this writer in 1982, it became increasingly obvious that African American men are feeling torn because of the demands of patriarchy. They feel that they must identify with patriarchy to have any kind of identity. Consequently, there is an overcompensation as well as an attempt to distance themselves from the androgenous and equalitarian aspects of the past. African American males are losing touch with the racial and archetypal history. They are overemphasizing only one aspect of their total personhood.

The recovery of the feminine means recovering an ancient synthesis between male and female. Equalitarian and androgenous roles are contemporary manifestations of this ancient reconciliation. Pastoral counselors need to be aware of the cultural heritage of African American males and employ this awareness in pastoral counseling.

Recovering a synthesis between male and female aspects of the African American male personality must be distinguished from the forced submission and effeminization of Black males by White society. Frances Cress Welsing in *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors* explores her belief that the effeminization of the African American male is the result of a deep seated fear of albinism. Genetic albinism is a genetic deficiency rooted in skin melanization where white tends to be dominated by black, brown, red or yellow. Consequently, Welsing believes that all racism and the effeminization of African American males is rooted in White peoples’ fear of the annihilation of whiteness due to the dominance of

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14 Ibid., p. 83.
the color black.

The emphasis on African American males embracing their femaleness as well as their maleness is not an attempt to get them to adopt the effeminization effort of the wider society. In fact, what is called for is the opposite. African American males are enjoined to embrace the African American tradition of equalitarian relationships and androgenous roles. This emphasis emerges out of an empathy for what womanists call the strength of African American womanhood. This strength comes from identifying with one's own cultural heritage rather than trying to gain distance from it. The strengths of the womanist is that she looks inward to African American culture rather than outward, to wider societal images of masculinity and femininity.

The Oral and Cultural Style of Communication

Growing out of the creative synthesis between male and female is the African American male’s penchant for story-telling as a means of creating intimacy. Oral skills are highly prized historically in Africa and in the African American community. African American culture has been characterized as oral as opposed to ocular. Oral is often associated with the feminine. Ocular is often associated with reason, abstract thinking, reading, and writing. These latter characteristics are considered masculine. Oral skills are a carry-over from the creative synthesis of male and female in African antiquity.

Story-telling as an oral form is relational and facilitates bonding. It requires mutual empathy. The story-teller and the story-listener must enter the world of the other for story-telling to

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15 For a discussion of how African American women have embraced their cultural tradition more than African American men, see Katie G. Cannon, Black Womanist Ethics (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 87-88.
be effective. Story-telling requires a relationship and telling stories helps to build relationships. Story-telling and story-listening are at the roots of African American culture.

African American males have a proclivity for story-telling, particularly as a means of self-expression and intimacy. The writer and his wife discovered this while doing marriage enrichment seminars with African American couples. Many men were reluctant to attend these events because they had a particular image of the popular encounter group movement. They thought that they had to air their dirty laundry in public, and they also thought they were being forced to deal with emotional and affective areas of their lives that they were not prepared to confront. We found, however, that African American men felt very much at home when they used the story-telling method. They could talk about intimate things by the use of narrative retelling of events. They also enjoyed hearing their wives telling stories and relating experiences from the past. Story-telling about meaningful events was the starting point. Later the model began to explore story-telling around events that caused pain and hurt. It was found that the story-telling approach enabled African American men to utilize a style that was natural for them. It was important to stay away from the forced, direct emotional expressiveness and openness which is the emphasis in verbal-emotional-behavioral models of much of counseling and psychotherapy. By utilizing the story-telling approach it was possible to draw on an indigenous style of relating that was comfortable for African American men and women.

There is a caution in the literature about the use of a story-telling cultural style by African American men. Delores P. Aldridge

warns that the inclination of Black men toward story-telling may be a camouflage for lack of intimacy between them and Black women. Citing research, she remonstrates that verbal facility among African American males makes it easier to enter into relationships with African American females. However, if their words and stories are a cover for the lack of genuine feelings and empathy for the partner, this often leads to serious relational difficulties. This warning is needed because the narrative oral cultural style can often deteriorate into talk and no corresponding action.

The implication of the use of the narrative oral cultural style in pastoral counseling is that the pastoral counselor needs to begin with and attend to the stories of the male. As soon as a therapeutic relationship is developed, attention needs to be given to the words one says and one's concrete behaviors. Effort needs to be made to push beyond words to the concrete behavior the stories describe.

One means of pushing beyond the words and addressing behaviors is to explore the kinds of relationships that African American men have. Carolyn McCrary points out that one reason African American men split talk and behavior is that many of them are uprooted from support systems in the Black community. These support systems include the family, church, and social networks in community. In this situation talk often becomes a substitute for actual relating. The implication for pastoral counseling is that more attention needs to be paid to the participation of African American males in support systems. It is of the utmost importance to encourage them to maintain these ties.

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Examining the Stories that African American Males Use

It is also important to examine the stories that African American men tell. Particularly in terms of the plots that exist in the stories. It is crucial to explore whether the plots are tragic and growth-hindering, or whether they are hopeful and growth-facilitating. Undergirding some of the stories that African American men tell is a belief that life has no real opportunities. Often the discrepancy between the words and the behavior relate to a lack of hope and the kinds of tragedies experienced in the lives of African American men. The critical issue to be kept in mind when addressing the tragic stories of African American men is to explore the plot and offer alternative stories that challenge existing stories.

One example is instructive. This story is about one of my counselees whom I will call Sylvester, a young African American male who actually referred to his life as one that resembled that of Sisyphus, the Greek character who was doomed perpetually to roll stones up hills, but never succeed in getting them to the top. When Sisyphus managed to get the stone near the top of the hill, it began to roll back down. He was condemned by the Greek god Zeus, because he had witnessed one of Zeus' indiscretions and reported it. Sisyphus was a tragic figure who was never really able to change his life because of the abuse of one of the leading gods of the Greeks.

The young man who told this story was bright enough. He had a college and seminary education. Nonetheless, he saw his life as one of tragedy and dead ends. What this writer learned from working with him in counseling is that counselees often see their lives in terms of central stories. In fact, many not only identify with the characters in these stories, but also mimetically identify with the plot. This means that they mimic or imitate the plot that lies behind the story. This young man found it difficult to embrace an

alternative plot for his life.

The writer formerly assumed that this young African American was an isolated case by virtue of his identification with the myth of Sisyphus. Sylvester's training and education exposed him to such a figure. Others who did not have the same academic opportunities would probably not have made the connection between their lives and that of Sisyphus. My assumption, however, proved to be erroneous. At the beginning of this essay reference was made to the docudrama, "Murder Without Motive: The Story of Edmond Perry." This was a story about another talented youth, a young man from Harlem who was shot down by a policeman in plain clothes in a Harlem park. This young man happened to be back in New York after finishing an exclusive New England preparatory school and was spending the summer at home before matriculating at Stanford University. He had a promising future, but a tragic end.

The docudrama highlighted a series of events that led to his death. As indicated earlier, Edmond's interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus in a high school class turned out to be monumental in his own life's journey. After reading the story, he commented that Harlem was full of people who had the same script as Sisyphus. He also said that they were hopelessly trapped, not knowing how to get stones rolled over the top of the hill.

Edmond turned out also to have identified with Sisyphus. He was told that his ticket out of the ghetto was being well educated and part of the elite. He discovered, however, that identification with the American dream was empty without acceptance and a meaningful purpose in life. He could find neither acceptance nor purpose. His final act of desperation was to make a suicidal attack on a White policeman in plain clothes. The policeman shot him in self-defense. The young man lived out the plot of Sisyphus to its tragic end.

It has become clearer to me that African American males
between the ages of 16-26, like Edmond and Sylvester, are finding themselves caught up in the myth of Sisyphus with no way out. This revelation is the result of my being increasingly involved in family counseling with young African American males who are beginning to live out the tragic myth of Sisyphus.

The inescapable conclusion is that pastoral counseling with African American males must address the stories that underlie their lives. These stories must be identified and explored in depth in pastoral counseling. One helpful way of proceeding is to assist them to explore how the story will turn out if they continue to follow the plot line. Another goal is to help them discover alternative stories that are growth-producing. My books entitled African American Pastoral Care and Prayer in Pastoral Counseling contain some examples of how to examine and explore stories that have negative impact on people’s lives. If pastoral counseling with African American males is going to address the problems, it must address the narratives on which these males base their lives.

### Editing Stories of African American Males

One of the significant means of doing pastoral counseling with Black men is to provide a forum for them to explore their personal stories in light of divine Scriptures. Scriptural stories in the Old and New Testaments often provide a better vision and future hope for many African American males than does the Greek tragic myths such as the myth of Sisyphus. One important thing to attempt to do with African American males is to explore with them the biblical characters and stories with which they have identified. Many Black men, especially the homeless and victims of AIDS,

have backgrounds that are steeped in Bible stories. These stories have become an important resource for pastoral counseling with them. It is, therefore, quite evident that Bible stories and characters still permeate the lives of African Americans despite the alienation many feel from the church.

The writer has attempted to explore with young African American men the biblical stories and characters that have influenced them. The goal is to help them to take the role of the characters with whom they identify. This is called role-taking. Role-taking is a concept that has appeared in the psychology of religion that focuses on the power of Biblical characters to shape people's perception of reality, to influence the way they interpret what happens to them, and to provide a vantage point for envisioning hope in the world.

The significance of taking the role of biblical characters rests upon the fact that a vision of hope undergirds Bible stories. Bible stories and Bible characters are always moving toward a hopeful future, even though there may be many hardships and difficulties that must be faced. Such a vision of the future challenges the tragic dimension and stories held out by wider society through the myth of Sisyphus. The goal of role-taking in pastoral counseling is to assist African American men to find a deeper reason for living meaningful lives rooted in a hopeful vision of the future.

In his _Visions for Black Men_, Na’im Akbar proclaims that we should not underestimate the vision-shaping possibilities of

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23 The writer’s wife directed a day shelter for homeless people in Evanston, Illinois, for two years. During that time the writer was very involved with working with homeless people in pastoral counseling. He also worked with a support group for AIDS workers who often found that African American AIDS victims used Bible stories, characters, and songs as a resource for sustenance during their battles with AIDS.

Scripture. While he emphasizes the symbolic universality of biblical mythology, the idea is embraced that those who claim Christianity are part of the same historical stream represented in the Bible. That is to say that Black people were present in the Bible along with all others and were included in God’s vision of salvation. The point is that there is more than just mythical efficacy to the Bible; the Bible also has a liberating historical efficacy for freeing African Americans from oppression and mind slavery.

Pastoral counseling helps African American males to compare their own personal stories with that of the larger vision of biblical stories. The goal and aim is to encourage them to edit or re-author their stories in light of a larger vision of reality. In the process of editing they embrace their true identities and manhood the way many of their foreparents did. Liberation for Black men comes, then, when they rediscover the significance of the Bible for their lives.

Learning to See the World Through The Eyes of Women

In the Fall of each academic year the writer teaches a course on group therapy for African American males and females. Most of the time in the course is given to helping group members to see the world through the eyes of other group members. This is done through attending to and exploring feelings and seeking to interpret how persons see the world. The writer tries to be sensitive to all who are involved and to model that sensitivity as part of the role of the therapist.

Toward the seventh week of the course it was noticed that the males were resisting seeing the world through the eyes of the

women. Many males were not aware that they were doing this. However, once this behavior was interpreted, the males began to be more interested in seeing the world through the eyes of women. In doing so they began to discover sides of themselves and strengths that they did know that they had. They came to realize that trying to perceive reality through the eyes of women added rather than subtracted things from their lives. They began to discover that women became more responsive to them as a result.

Many African American males fear making the attempt to see things through the eyes of women. At issue is the dominant images of what it means to be male and female in this culture. The value of trying to see the world through the eyes of African American women is that it may lead to further personal wholeness for both males and females. It is significant that such an effort is able to restore the creative synthesis between maleness and femaleness that is part of our racial and ethnic heritage.

Pastoral counselors need to be aware that helping African American men see reality through the eyes of women has the potential of enabling them to discover hidden aspects of their essential personality in its wholeness. This is best accomplished in the group setting.

The most important thing that Black men can learn from Black women is how to relate to their African American heritage. Womanist thinkers have helped us see that many African American woman find their source of strength coming from their having embraced their cultural and religious heritage. They place emphasis on being connected with it more than with the expectations of the majority society. This is a way of life that African American men must rediscover. Such a rediscovery will put African American men in touch with their historical and religious roots.

**Modeling Attention to Feelings Through Self-Disclosure**

When the writer and his wife do marriage enrichment sem-
inars for African American couples we employ a process of modeling through self-disclosure. We teach the story-telling model by telling stories ourselves about our own lives. This brings relaxation to the group and facilitates the involvement of the males in meaningful ways.

Self-disclosure on our part is not only meaningful to the group, but also helps to model what should be shared and what should not be shared in such settings. This is important in overcoming the view that counseling and enrichment experiences require airing dirty laundry in public.

In pastoral counseling with African American males, self-disclosure is critical. Not only does it give an example of what is expected, it also presents a model of what to do and how to do it. Modelling through self-disclosure brings a perspective to the group members' already existing story-telling skills that tends to induce genuineness or authenticity.

Finally, a word needs to be said about immediacy. Immediacy refers to attending to the feelings and the relationships that exist between the pastoral counselor and the counselee at a particular moment in the counseling process. It is important because of the cultural value placed on the relational style in the African American community. This means that many African Americans are people who are oriented and prefer direct involvement styles of relating. This is particularly important when counseling with African American males.

**Summary**

One major theme in this essay is the necessity of recovering the full manhood of the African American male through the rediscovery of the feminine side of his personality. Manhood has been

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defined as wholeness, and this wholeness can be achieved by tapping into a reservoir that transcends stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity. The sources of this reservoir are the African pre-history of creative synthesis between the masculine and the feminine, the cultural oral style, stories and Scriptures that are used, the capacity to see the world through the eyes of women, and modeling wholeness and immediacy in pastoral counseling. The hope of African American males is to become full participants in the family, the extended family, church, and community networks that are vital sources of this reservoir and of his personhood.

The policy implications of these contentions relate to the appropriation of the cultural and religious heritage of African Americans. This essay has lifted up the fundamentals that shape manhood in the Black community. Valuing this heritage as well as sanctioning the appropriation of it is essential. In developing a macro-picture for the ills facing African American men, it is important not to forget the role of micro-strategies which facilitate wholeness that take place in the religious life of the community, in families, and in pastoral care and counseling. These micro-strategies include Bible reading, participation in religious ritual and activities, story-telling and story-listening, pastoral counseling and face-to-face relationships. Such micro-strategies are building blocks for attaining holistic personhood.
Black Religion: Strategies of Survival, Elevation, and Liberation

In a classic essay on Black religion W. E. B. DuBois wrote: “Three things characterized this religion of the slave—the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy.”¹ Although this classic description captures the dynamic of the Africans’ earliest appropriation of evangelical Protestantism on both sides of the Atlantic, contemporary historical studies reveal a more complex and comprehensive pattern of religious development. From a perspective that includes not only what DuBois called “an adaptation and mingling of heathen rites . . . roughly designated as Voodooism,”² but also the institutionalization of incipient slave worship in Black American churches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, three dominant themes or motifs stand out as foundational from the Jamestown Landing to the present. They are survival, elevation, and liberation.

It is tempting to try to encompass the entire history of Black religion in this country by arranging these motifs in chronological order. In that case paradigms of survival—the sheer effort to use religion to stay alive, to keep body and soul together—would characterize the earliest period of clandestine slave worship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; efforts to make religion a ladder for the educational, moral, and cultural elevation of resourceful individuals would cover the second period, from the 1850s through the “civilizing” efforts of White missionaries during the Reconstruction, to what Woodson called the “institutional churches” of the first half

² Ibid., p. 145.
of the twentieth century; and finally, the paradigm of liberation—direct action on the part of churches to free the slaves, combat racial discrimination, and garner Black political, economic, and moral power—would represent the third period, from the Civil War to the end of the twentieth century.

On closer scrutiny, however, this neat chronological order breaks down. One sees these themes entwining and overlapping in various configurations at several stages. Albeit, as this essay will show, the chronological sequence is useful. Yet, in the final analysis, it is more accurate to understand survival, elevation, and liberation as major emphases that emerged simultaneously through the entire course of African American religious history.

The African Heritage

It seems incontrovertible that religious traditions brought from West Africa gave early comfort and consolation to the slaves as they were slowly acculturated to the new religion of Christianity in North America. In the beginning African traditional religions functioned as a survival strategy for the captives struggling to maintain life and sanity under bondage to White people who regarded them as little more than beasts of burden. The first Africans who were transported in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought religious beliefs and practices that prevented them from


4 For example, a radical liberationist orientation is seen in the religiously-inspired Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner rebellions of 1822 and 1831, while the newly independent African Methodist Episcopal churches of the North were cooperating with groups like the American Moral Reform Society, seeking to elevate life in the antebellum ghettos of the Northern cities through education and cultural refinement. Similarly, in the storefront Pentecostal churches of the innercity between the two World Wars there was a reversion to the same patterns of emotionality and other African forms of religiosity that helped the slaves keep their sanity and survive the brutality of plantation life in the late eighteenth century.
being totally dehumanized by chattel slavery. In their homeland they had shared, within many tribal groups, certain ancient ways of life—rituals, wise sayings, and ethical teachings—that had been handed down from generation to generation. Ancient beliefs, folklore, attitudes, and practices provided a holistic view of reality that made no radical separation between religion and life. There was in the affairs of everyday no consciousness that at one moment one was being religious and at another moment non-religious or secular. There was no sense that certain understandings of time, space, human affairs, or relations between human and divine beings, belonged to science or philosophy rather than to religion; to the life of the mind rather than the life of the spirit.

We must proceed carefully here. This is not to claim that the slaves and those they left behind in Africa did not perceive the difference between sacrificing a chicken to a familial god and hoeing a garden. We are not saying that Africans did not esteem some men and women more than others because of the special training and knowledge they possessed that could open up the secrets of nature, man, and God. Precisely so. But there was no absolute disjunction between the sacred and the secular. What we must understand is that the African perspective looked upon the work of the intellect and the work of the spirit as a harmonious whole, as being ultimately about the same thing. Presuppositions and experiences of the unity of body and spirit, of what we might call today the profane and the holy, was the common privilege of everyone—not the guarded sinecure of intellectuals called philosophers and religionists called priests or witch doctors.

It may be almost impossible for modern people to understand fully the way of life out of which the slaves came. We have to change our entire habit of thought about the difference between being and doing, between reflection and action, the commonplace, ordinary affairs of daily existence and what we vaguely call the "spiritual life." Only in this way can we begin to appreciate the compre-
hensive, unitary character of the African consciousness. Of course, some scholars contend that the past was almost completely obliterated for the slaves brought to North America. But let us argue, for the moment, that for those who did remember anything about their former life (and it is unreasonable to assume that everything was immediately forgotten once they disembarked on the quays of Jamestown or Charleston) there was no separation between religion and life, between the sacred and the profane. Experience was truth and truth was experience. The single entity—what we might call “life-truth”—comprehended the totality of existence. Reality was, at one and the same time, immanent and transcendent, material and spiritual, mundane and numinous.

It should not be assumed that we are dealing here with some simplistic and naive stage of humanization. The folklore of Africa, comprising thousands of myths, folktales, and proverbs still being transmitted from one generation to another, is as subtle and complex in its probity as the choicest dialectical ruminations in Plato's Republic. As one scholar writes concerning the excellence of the proverbs of the Yoruba people of Nigeria:

Surely these proverbs are indications of no ordinary perception of moral truths, and are sufficient to warrant the inference that in closeness of observation, in depth of thought, and shrewd intelligence, the Yoruba is no ordinary man.5

Nor were Africans so unsophisticated in their ideas of God that the religions that some slaves preserved can be dismissed as grossly inadequate compared with the rarified theological ruminations of the missionaries. Not only had many been introduced to

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Islam and Christianity in West Africa, but their traditional religions were not inferior in insight and coherence to those two great faiths. The Nigerian author Chinua Achebe catches the keen wit and profundity of the traditional religionist, Akunna, in a confrontation with Mr. Brown, an English missionary who came to Akunna’s village.

“You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth,” said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown’s visits. “We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods.”

“There are no other gods,” said Mr. Brown. “Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood—like that one” (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna’s carved Ikenga hung), “and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood.”

“Yes,” said Akunna. “It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But He made them for His messengers so that we could approach Him through them. It is like yourself. You are the head of your church.”

“No,” protested Mr. Brown. “The head of my church is God Himself.”

“I know,” said Akunna, “but there must be a head in this world among men. Somebody like yourself must be the head here.”

Achebe’s deftly drawn picture of Ibo life shows the inseparable connection between the soil in which the ancestors are buried,

the community, and God. It calls into question all the West's facile assumptions about the childishness of African religion and philosophy. Without it the African arrivals to the New World would have been hollow men and women. With it they were able to survive with their bodies and souls intact for the long and rugged ascent into the twentieth century.

**The Christianization of the Slaves**

Any analysis of Black religion in America must begin with two issues of critical importance: the attitude of White Christians toward the Christianization and emancipation of the slaves, and the nature of the earliest slave religion. The first recorded baptism of an African in the American colonies occurred in Virginia in 1624, but there was no systematic evangelization until the eighteenth century. Even then, the colonists were in no hurry to introduce their slaves to Christianity. The English rationalized the enslavement of both Africans and Indians because they were both different in appearance to themselves and because they were heathens. When it became evident that Blacks were becoming believers despite widespread neglect by official church bodies, Virginia was the first of the colonies to make short shrift of the matter by declaring in 1667 that "... the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom."

It was difficult enough to induce a healthy state of religion among the White population. Attempts by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, an outpost of the bishops of London, to encourage planters to provide religious instruction for their slaves were largely unsuccessful, but almost from the beginning some Blacks attended public worship and requested baptism. By the American Revolution a few had become Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists. In South Carolina, one missionary, the Reverend Samuel Thomas of Goose Creek, reported
as early as 1705 that he had given religious instruction to at least a thousand slaves, many of whom could read the Bible and were memorizing the Creed.

Taking the gospel to Blacks helped to ease the consciences of the colonial religious establishment about slavery, but it did not solve the problem completely. All of the American churches wrestled with the issue and, with the possible exception of the Quakers, finally compromised their ethical sensibilities. Bitter contention raged between Northern and Southern churchmen and as early as 1837 there were splits among the Lutherans and Presbyterians. In 1844 the Methodist Church divided North and South over slavery, followed by the Baptists in 1845. The antislavery American Missionary Association virtually split the Congregational Church in 1846. The Presbyterians finally set up Northern and Southern branches in 1861 and a fissure opening up in the Episcopal Church was aborted in 1862 by the refusal of Northern Episcopalians to recognize that any controversy existed. Both the Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches, with some difficulty, were able to maintain structural unity throughout the Civil War.

The Evolution of Black Christianity

During the anguish in the White churches over slavery, the special nature of Black Christianity asserted itself. We do not know when the first slaves stole away from the surveillance of the masters to worship in their own way. Two conjectures seem reasonable. First, it must have been early in the seventeenth century, for Africans would not have neglected practicing their ancestral religion altogether, and the Whites did little to induce them to adopt theirs. Secondly, it is unlikely that the worship they engaged in was devoid of transplanted survivals from Africa. Today most scholars accept the position of W. E. B. DuBois and Melville Herskovits that fragments of African religion survived the Middle Passage and the
“breaking-in” process in North America, to reappear under disguise in the early religious meetings of the “Invisible Institution”—the proto-church of the slaves. One contemporary secular scholar writes:

In the United States, many African religious rites were fused into one—voodoo. From the whole panoply of African deities, the slaves chose the snake god of the Whydah, Fon, and Ewe. Symbolic of the umbilical cord and the rainbow, the snake embodied the dynamic, changing quality of life. In Africa it was sometimes the god of fertility and the determiner of good and ill fortune. Only by worshipping the god could one invoke his protective spirit.

There is scant evidence that Voodoo or some discrete form of reinterpreted African religion synthesized as effectively with Protestantism in the English colonies as it did with Roman Catholicism in the Caribbean and Latin America. Nevertheless, reports of missionaries and slave narratives show that the African conjurer and medicine man, the manipulation of charms and talismans, and the use of drums and dancing, were present in the slaves quarters as survival strategies, even after conversion. Selective elements of African religions were not easily exterminated. A Presbyterian missionary, the Reverend Charles C. Jones, described what he encountered among the slaves as late as 1842:

True religion they are inclined to place in profession, in forms and ordinances, and in excited states of feeling. And true conversion in dreams, visions, trances, voices—all bearing a perfect or striking

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resemblance to some form or type which has been handed down for generations, or which has been originated in the wild fancy of some religious teacher among them. 

Mr. Jones warned his fellow missionaries that the Blacks displayed sophisticated perversions of the gospel accountable only to the influence of African survivals. So impressed was he with their covert resistance to White Christianity that he compared their objections to “the ripe scholarship and profound intelligence of critics and philosophers.” African religion—childlike?

The First Black Churches

Although there was a Black congregation on the plantation of William Byrd III, near Mecklenburg, Virginia as early as 1758, the first Black-led churches formed along the Savannah River in Georgia and South Carolina in the 1770s, and in the North at about the same time. Immediately following the Revolution Black imitations of White Baptist and Methodist churches appeared in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York City. But in the Sea Islands off South Carolina and Georgia, in Louisiana, and on scattered plantations across the Southeast, a distinctive form of Black folk religion flourished and infused the adopted White evangelicalism with retentions of African spirituality. A new and implacable African American Christianity was being created, much less puritanical and otherworldly than its White counterpart. The three best-known slave revolts were led by fervently religious men—Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822, and Nat Turner in

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1831. Studies of the music of the early Black Church show that hidden rebelliousness and a desire for emancipation were often expressed in song. The independent Black churches—particularly the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ)—were "freedom churches" in the sense that their latent, if not manifest, concern was liberation from slavery and elevation to a higher status through education and self-help.

David George, who served as de facto pastor of an independent Black congregation at Silver Bluff, S.C., before 1775; George Liele and Andrew Bryan of the First Colored Baptist Church in Savannah; Josiah Bishop of Portsmouth, Virginia, and other preachers—from 1760 to 1795—were all former slaves who ministered in hostile territory under the sponsorship and with the encouragement of radical White Baptist preachers. Some among them, like the full-blooded African, "Uncle Jack," "Black Harry" Hosier, who served the Methodist bishop Francis Asbury, and the many illiterate preachers mentioned in missionary reports and other sources, are almost legendary. Many of their sermons dealt with the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian captivity, the stories of heroism and faithfulness in the Old Testament, and the identification of Jesus with the poor and downtrodden masses. Though mainly untutored, but rarely unsophisticated, they told "many-a-truth in a joke," as the saying goes, slyly philosophizing about how "God don't like ugly," and "everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin' there," obliquely reassuring their congregations of the ultimate vindication of their suffering. Moreover, many animal tales, adages, and proverbs that make up the corpus of Black folklore were repeated from the pulpit as homiletical devices, as one preacher said, to "explain the unexplainable, define the indefinable, and unscrew the inscrutable."

The theological motif of these early preachers was survival by virtue of supernatural power available to believers. They were preoccupied with maintaining their people's sanity, keeping them
alive, helping them to retain some semblance of personhood and self-esteem in the face of massive dehumanization. Blassingame writes:

One of the primary reasons the slaves were able to survive the cruelty they faced was that their behavior was not totally dependent on their masters . . . In religion, a slave exercised his own independence of conscience. Convinced that God watched over him, the slave bore his earthly afflictions in order to earn a heavenly reward. Often he disobeyed his earthly master’s rules to keep his Heavenly Master’s commandments . . . Religious faith gave an ultimate purpose to his life, a sense of communal fellowship and personal worth, and reduced suffering from fear and anxiety.10

Development of the Northern Churches

A somewhat different tradition developed among Black churches in the North. Many of their pastors also emerged from slavery and humble rural backgrounds. But in the freer atmosphere of the North the theological content of their religion took a different turn. It tended toward the ethical revivalism that inundated White Protestant churches following the Second Great Awakening (1790-1815). It was more urbane, more appealing to those Blacks who were beginning to enjoy a relative measure of prosperity and greater educational opportunities.

After Richard Allen and Absalom Jones protested racial segregation by walking out of St. George’s Methodist Church in

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10 Blassingame, Slave Community, p. 206.
Philadelphia in 1787, they founded a quasi-religious community organization called the Free African Society which was replicated in other cities. In Baltimore, New York, Providence, and Boston, these associations—dedicated to the educational, moral, and religious uplift of Africans—became the scaffolding of the Black churches of the North. Immediately following voluntary or forced separation from the White churches, African Americans demonstrated an overarching interest in social, economic, and political advancement by making their new churches the center of such activities. They were aided by White friends such as Anthony Benezet and Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia in organizing and funding their benevolent societies, but their churches were the main engines driving all “secular” enterprise. The primary impulse behind these Northern developments was a desire for autonomy, racial solidarity, self-help, and personal and group elevation.

Thus, Peter Spencer formed a new denomination, the Union Church of African Members, in Wilmington, Delaware in 1813; Richard Allen, became the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in Philadelphia in 1816; James Varick, the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, founded in New York in 1821. These men, together with Absalom Jones, rector of St. Thomas Episcopal Church of Africans in Philadelphia; John Gloucester, pastor of the First African Presbyterian Church of the same city; Peter Williams, Jr., the first ordained Black priest of the Episcopal Church in New York, and Thomas Paul, founder of the first Black Baptist Church, also in New York City, were all strong, progressive leaders who, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, promoted education and social betterment as a religious obligation. They encouraged Northern lay people to undertake racial progress programs and

activities at a time when public meetings of Blacks were forbidden in the South and even preaching was prohibited except under White supervision.

We can speak of these Northern church leaders, therefore, as elevationists in the sense that their concerns went beyond mere survival. Although a physician and journalist, Martin R. Delany, of Pittsburgh, is a good example of the elevationist orientation. For Delany education, self-help, a desire for equality and racial advancement were ladders of Black elevation and "the means by which God intended man to succeed."

If, as before stated, a knowledge of all the various business enterprises, trades, professions, and sciences, is necessary for the elevation of the white, a knowledge of them also is necessary for the elevation of the colored man . . . What we desire to learn now is, how to effect a remedy; this we have endeavored to point out. Our elevation must be the result of self-efforts, and work of our own hands. No other human power can accomplish it.12

The concept of elevation appears by name in Black literature throughout the nineteenth century. Black men and women, clergy and lay, envisioned a broad horizon of racial uplift or advancement through religion.13 They were those who dominated the free Black communities of the North and led such causes as the boycotting of goods produced by slave labor, resistance to efforts of the American Colonization Society to return them to Africa, and

13 Delores Williams combines the survival and elevation motifs into a dyadic emphasis which she terms "the survival/quality-of-life tradition." This she concludes, is a female-centered tradition originally appropriated from the Bible and emphasizing God's positive response to the Black family rather than capitulation to the degrading, hopeless conditions of Black existence during and after slavery. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 6.
the promotion of moral reform societies. As the clergy became more
distracted by ecclesiastical responsibilities, the secular organizations
that they had spawned gradually became autonomous, although still
under the parental influence of the larger churches. Such was the
case of the American Moral Reform Society and the National
Negro Convention movement. The latter first met in a church in
1830 and held seven consecutive annual convocations on eleva-
tionist issues. Many of these meetings were attended by liberal
Whites to whom they provided an opportunity to continue a fel-
lowship with Blacks (and to exercise subtle control) that had been
made more difficult by the development of separate Black churches.

The regional and national conventions devoted to aboli-
tion and moral reform also represented the liberation motif that was
nurtured by a Black middle class anxious for upward mobility. It
soon extricated itself from the direct control of the preachers. Its
real impetus was to come from church-related, but intellectually
independent laymen and women—from Paul Cuffee, the
Massachusetts sea captain, to Maria Stewart, Booker T.
Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois. In the antebellum period the
themes of liberation and racial elevation were sponsored by rela-
tively wealthy laymen like James Forten, Robert Purvis, William
Whipper, and William C. Nell. The most influential among them
was the journalist David Walker, whose incendiary Appeal to the
Colored Citizens of the World in 1829, inspired former slaves like
Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, and “free born” pro-
pagandists like Martin R. Delany, William H. Day, and H. Ford
Douglass.14

A Comparison of Motifs

There is, obviously, an intricate and dialectical relation-

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14 See Henry Highland Garnet, Walker’s Appeal, With a Brief Sketch of His Life (New York: J.
H. Tobitt Co., 1848); Herbert Aptheker, “One Continual Cry,” David Walker’s Appeal (New
ship between the survival, liberation, and elevation traditions in the Black community. All three were seminal in the churches of the nineteenth century and continued into the next century in various configurations and degrees of tension, depending upon the situation that existed in different geographical areas. In the ghetto of Los Angeles, between 1906 and the First World War, the survival oriented followers of William J. Seymour and other charismatic evangelists produced an unprecedented display of African religious retentions that had lain dormant for a hundred years in the interstices of Black rural society. Thus a Black Pentecostalism was born that had been nurtured in the "Invisible Institution," but almost extinguished by the middle class Negro churches and the White missionaries who came South with the Union Army. Holiness or Pentecostalism claimed 34 percent of the Black churches in New York City in the mid-1920s. In twelve other Northern cities in 1930, 37 percent of the churches were storefront missions that fostered a volatile combination of survival and liberation hermeneutics. During and after the First World War this distinctive strain of lower class religion, derided and repudiated by the elevation oriented churches of the established middle classes, was radicalized, and in the white-hot, purifying fires of its African-like forge metamorphosed into various religio-political sects and cults, including Blackenized versions of Judaism and Islam.

Between the First and Second World Wars it was necessary to realign the survival, elevation, and liberation motifs so as to create the kind of balance and harmony between them that would conduce to racial advancement. It was the experience of Black leadership during the era of abolitionism and emigrationism that when one of these themes is either neglected or exaggerated above the other two, the result is that commitment to the biblical God and to a militant Church, on one hand, and Black political, economic, and cultural life on the other hand, fall apart. The center collapses and chaos reigns. That happened during Reconstruction and again dur-
ing the Great Depression. On both occasions the consequence was a kind of racial schizophrenia that left the masses in moral confusion and the middle classes in a spiritual malaise that was powerless to give the leadership necessary for realignment and a new beginning when relative calm and prosperity returned.

Beginning in 1955, it was the genius of Martin Luther King, Jr., that brought the three motifs or traditions together again in a prophetic ministry that wedded the deep spirituality and will to survive of the alienated and impoverished masses, with the sophisticated pragmatism and will to achieve equality and liberation that characterized the parvenu urbanites and the Negro intelligentsia—the “New Negro” of the Harlem Renaissance. King embraced all three of these tendencies and created a multi-dimensional movement, inseparable from the Black Church, that set in motion social, political, economic, religious, and cultural forces that have not yet run their full course. Martin King stands, therefore, at the pinnacle of Black religious and political development in the twentieth century. He was not alone in pointing the way to a new future, for the Black Muslim minister, Malcolm X, forced a decisive break between moderate accommodationism that compromised the liberation ideal and a form of protest that was truly revolutionary, that ultimately radicalized King. But in King was the confluence of all the complex and variegated tendencies and orientations that are summed up in the three motifs of survival, liberation, and elevation. Other leaders were to come out of the sacred ground upon which he stood, yet beyond him lay unexplored heights that could not have been seen without standing on his shoulders.

The publication in 1969 of James H. Cone’s thunderous challenge to Euro-American theological scholarship, Black Theology and Black Power,\(^\text{15}\) made room for an alternative strategy for the Black Church and an intrusive new tenant in the halls of

academe. This method of theologizing had not been altogether absent during the years before King, but had sulked in the shadows outside the mainstream Black churches and the ivy-covered walls of their schools and colleges. Cone’s first book gave a name to this neglected and ignored stream of African American religious thought that probably came into existence when the first slave tossed all night on his straw mat, wondering why he should be expected to believe in a God who ordained all Blacks to perpetual bondage. The name given by Cone to what he found pulsating just beneath the surface of King’s more conciliatory Social Gospel was “Black liberation theology.” The religious first cousin to the Black Power philosophy enunciated and popularized by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton. ¹⁶

Before the end of the 1960s the liberation theme had once again regained ascendancy and proliferated far beyond the Black ghettos of the United States. Liberation theology took root among oppressed campesinos and barrio-dwellers in Latin America, among Black Christians in South Africa, White feminists and Black womenists in the United States. It rapidly became a major topic among theologians on both sides of the Atlantic and in such ecumenical circles as the World Council of Churches. But the discussion was not limited to seminaries and church councils. A small but belligerent movement for Black religious power and social transformation broke out under the aegis of a new coalition of African American church executives, pastors, and academics that called itself the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC)—a Northern version of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The watchword in important segments of the African American religious community was liberation—freedom from racism, poverty, powerlessness, and every form of White domina-

tion. Liberation became a theological code word for the indigenous religious genius of the oppressed masses. On their part, African American theologians, freed from dependence upon priestcraft and deference to ecclesiastical authority, even within the Black Church, began to teach and write a revolutionary Christianity that began with Jesus, whom they called the Black Messiah. Jesus was the Oppressed Man of God who challenged the hypocrisy of Jewish religion, recapitulated in White Christianity and the corruptions of Negro religion, and the unjust power of the Roman state, recapitulated in the world-wide political and economic hegemony of American capitalism at the end of the twentieth century.

Facing the Present Crisis

Throughout their history African American churches have struggled to hold racial advancement on the political, economic, and cultural front and evangelism in a precarious balance. This enabled them to do three things: first to help the race survive, i.e., to hold body and soul together against the atrocities of White racism; secondly, to help the race free itself from legal slavery, economic exploitation, and the curse of second class citizenship; and thirdly, to elevate the young and the masses to a level of moral and spiritual integrity that ennobled individual lives and the collective life of the Black community. Today that community is in crisis partly because material interests—the desire for money and pleasure—has overridden the values of the Civil Rights era which opened up new opportunities for the Black middle class, and partly because the Black Church, seduced by evangelical conservatism, emotionalism, and ecclesiasticism, has lost the balance between the basic characteristics of Black religion—survival, liberation, and elevation. The disequilibrium of these motifs meant the loss of its true external mission and gift to American society, and at the same time, the loss of control over and the trivialization of its internal mission to itself
and Black culture. In consequence, the holistic character of Black religion was fractured after King and Malcolm, and both the Black Church and Black culture, previously inseparable, lost that essential connection. Today they find themselves, in the first instance, in the throes of a crisis of faith; and in the second instance, in the grip of a crisis of meaning.

These crises cannot be solved, however, by “the classes and masses” repudiating religion, or old men pretending that a transient youth culture which glorifies volatility, disregard for serious commitments, and calls Black women whores and bitches, is authentic African American culture. To undermine Black religion by alleging its mystification, and to trivialize African American culture by denying its historic linkage to the Black Church—is only to deepen the crisis, not get rid of it. Authentic Black faith has nothing to do with the dogmatic posturings of Black preachers who ape White televangelists, anymore than Hip Hop and New Jack City have to do with the rich vein of folk wisdom, African religious retentions, and African American intellectual traditions—from David Walker to Toni Morrison—or represent Black culture. Perhaps the time has come to reassert the great tradition we have been examining; to insert values that are truly Afrocentric; to rescue the inheritance of Martin and Malcolm—the strategies of survival, liberation, and elevation—from moral and spiritual debasement by children who never knew them and whom, shamefully, were never taught the truth about who they are and whence they came into this sorry plight.

This, I take it, is one of the goals of Black theology. If the Church will return to basics and tap once again into that ennobling and enlightened religion that brought Blacks through the Civil Rights period and helped them amass a modicum of Black Power, perhaps the crisis of these closing years of the twentieth century will

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be surmounted and they can go into the next one with integrity and hope. Martin King anticipated this possibility. Indeed, it was a part of his dream—an embracing of enduring values, a profoundly religious reorientation, a rejuvenation of the spirit of Blackness. This may well be what he was talking about when, at the end of his last book, he wrote these words:

This is our challenge. If we will dare to meet it honestly, historians in future years will have to say that there lived a great people—a Black people—who bore their burdens of oppression in the heat of many days and who, through tenacity and creative commitment, injected a new meaning into the veins of American life.18


Until now no King scholar has attempted a systematic study of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s theory of dignity. This is the task of Garth Baker-Fletcher, and he has admirably filled a long-standing void in the literature on King. The book is comprised of seven chapters through which the author traces the familial, social, philosophical, and theological roots of King’s emerging view of dignity and somebodyness.

Baker-Fletcher shows how a youthful King received his first lessons in the ethics of somebodyness from the teachings of his parents and grandparents. His inclusion of the contributions of King’s mother and grandmothers is one of the distinctives of this book. We learn that King was influenced by the “protest tradition” exhibited by his father and maternal grandfather. He learned the necessity of standing up in the face of injustice and dehumanizing treatment. He was also influenced by the “wisdom tradition” exhibited by his mother and grandmothers. From this he learned the importance of affirming his own sense of somebodyness.

Chapter two discusses the view of dignity King held during the early period of his work in the civil rights struggle. King introduced the term *somebodyness* as a way of naming the new sense of self-respect and dignity Blacks were gaining through nonviolent protest (48). Dignity had multiple meanings for King, who stressed both its theologico-metaphysical and social aspects.

In chapters three to five the author undertakes the mammoth task of uncovering the major *formal* philosophical and theological roots of King’s thought, showing skillfully how seminary and
graduate school helped him develop an intellectual framework for the early familial and church teachings he received on dignity. Chapter three focuses on the influence of “Boston Personalism.” Against recent King scholars like David Garrow and Keith D. Miller, the author does not degrade the personalistic influence on King. Instead he shows that King never tried to refute the claims of personalism or his affiliation with it (61).

Chapter four provides a thorough discussion on Kant’s theory of the moral nature, the principle of humanity, dignity, and how chief Personalists and King responded to these. We learn that King did not appropriate Kant’s ideas uncritically. He particularly rejected Kant’s view of freedom, concluding that it was too abstract and impersonal (85).

King was also influenced by Hegel’s dialectical method. Implicit in this method is the idea that growth comes through struggle, a principle King frequently appealed to and related to his idea that enhanced dignity comes through struggle. He first heard the latter expressed by his maternal grandfather when he was a child (7, 26, 90). In addition, King was influenced by Hegel’s adage, “the true is the whole,” and his philosophy of history.

Baker-Fletcher then weaves in the influence of nonviolence, contending that the synthesis of this with his training in personalism “distinguishes” King’s thought (93). King moves from thinking about nonviolence as a mere strategy for social change to viewing it as a way of life. Nonviolence is seen as the most reasonable way an oppressed people can both defend and increase their sense of somebodyness.

Chapter five reveals the foundations of King’s theological anthropology and his doctrine of love. The two chief concepts that undergird his doctrine of human nature are the image of God and agape. King rejected one-sided claims to persons’ essential goodness or essential badness, opting for the view that persons have the potential for both. He focused on the care of the entire person, for
both soul and body are sacred.

The next chapter reveals how King synthesized all that he learned into his mature view of dignity. The term he believed best captured his meaning is *somebodyness*. Baker-Fletcher examines King’s use of historico-political documents, various phrases and symbolic metaphors in order to give us a clear picture of King’s later view of dignity.

The final chapter endeavors to answer the question of whether King’s theory of dignity provides a resource for developing a contemporary theory of dignity. The author maintains that “The normative criterion for determining the adequacy of King’s thought for contemporary times will be that of *inclusiveness*, particularly gender inclusion” (165). A basic limitation of King’s view of dignity was his blindness to patriarchy (172).

The author wonders whether King’s focus on persons as ends in themselves precludes the idea of the dignity of nonhuman life. Although King’s view of dignity could provide a theoretical basis for ecological ethics, King did not develop this explicitly. His emphasis was on helping his people regain and increase their sense of dignity. Indeed, Baker-Fletcher is disturbed that so much attention is given the dignity of nonhuman existence when African Americans and other people of color are forced into “undignified living conditions” (171).

The author hopes this study will be the basis for a liberating theory of dignity for African American males. Any adequate view of dignity must be able to help Black males recapture their lost sense of self-affirmation and self-appreciation. Both this and the countering of the daily violence Black males experience can best be accomplished through nonviolence and dignity workshops.

Baker-Fletcher does an outstanding job of focusing on both the formative socio-religious and familial influences on King derived from the Black church, and European and European American philosophical and theological influences. His skillful use
of the both-and approach in this regard is commendable. This is different from the either-or approach of those who belittle the significance of European and European American influences on King's thought.

Another strength of this book is that Baker-Fletcher, unlike many recent King scholars, has at least read some of the significant literature on Personalism. He does not depend solely on secondary sources and hearsay. In addition, he includes a discussion of the contributions of the women in King's life, and encourages a more in-depth look at this neglected area of King's scholarship.

This book is not only a significant addition to theological ethics and Black theology, but to the literature on the philosophy and ethics of Personalism. It is an excellent resource for both the academic classroom and church study groups. I strongly recommend the study of this text and serious efforts to apply the theory of dignity that emerges from these pages.

Rufus Burrow, Jr.
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Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has made a tremendous contribution to American, African American, women's, and general and religious history in her recently published account of the rise, development, and accomplishments of the Black women’s movement among African American Baptist women. It has only been recently that increased attention has focused upon the historical study of Black Baptists. Even less scholarly examination has fallen
upon Black women religious history and Black women in particular. This has been unfortunate from a number of perspectives, including the simple fact that Black Baptists have constituted by far the largest form of Christianity or religion among African Americans. Unlike the study of the Methodists, and even more work needs to be done on them as well, the research and writing of Black Baptist history pose an additional challenge of identifying various bodies of Baptists, many of which are now defunct, and chronicling and analyzing their origins, growth, and impacts. To my knowledge, no comprehensive work has hitherto been done on Black Baptist women. Thus, Dr. Higginbotham has not only illumined a huge area that hitherto has been vastly untreated, she has admirably and superbly done so in a pioneering fashion.

*Righteous Discontent* is composed of seven clearly-written, finely organized, and well-documented chapters. Chapter 1 examines the need for a study of the Black women's movement among the Baptists. Higginbotham reminds us that African American women during this era had to deal not only with racial, but also gender questions. In Chapter 2 the author states the Black female's counterpart to W. E. B. Du Bois's understanding of the Talented Tenth. Higginbotham specifies women who called upon those of more fortunate means and education to assume the burden of uplifting the masses of African American womenfolk. In Chapter 3 we learn of the "separate leanings" of Black churches during the post-Reconstruction era. Not only did Black churches serve a spiritual function for the Black community, but they were also important vehicles of racial pride, self-help, and self-determination. Black women, we are informed, played crucial roles in establishing separate enclaves of Black Baptist groups. In addition to their racial solidarity with Black males, Black women also formed associations of "unlikely sisterhood" with White Baptist women, especially those from the North, as related in Chapter 4. We must not romanticize this relationship by imagining that northern White Baptist women
were devoid of racial prejudice, stereotypical understanding of certain aspects of Black religious and cultural life, and their own “mixed motives.” Still, Higginbotham insists, there existed genuine interracial cooperation or sisterhood between these two groups of Baptist women and they labored jointly to uplift the masses of poor Black women in the South.

Chapter 5 puts forth the thesis that Black women, whether formally or informally, advocated a “feminist theology.” They examined the biblical and religious traditions to highlight the achievements of sacred heroines and the principle of spiritual equality of the two genders. These women, however, did not challenge the traditional proscription against ordained ministry for women. For some time there had been successful efforts to establish separate women’s conventions affiliated with state Baptist conventions. By 1900 that movement had succeeded on a national scale with the founding of the Woman’s Convention as an auxiliary group of the recently created National Baptist Convention, but independent of its control. Chapter 6 chronicles this success and demonstrates the significance the Convention had for providing women with a national voice to address racial and gender issues. Chapter 7 examines the 1900-1920 years and “The Politics of Respectability.” Focusing on the work and philosophy of the Woman’s Convention, Higginbotham shows the varied means that Black Baptist women employed to deal with the still deteriorating socio-economic and political conditions of African Americans in general and women in particular. The Convention and its leaders preached a theology or philosophy of good morals and manners; acquisition of education (especially vocational or domestic training) as exemplified in the National Training School for Women and Girls, established in Washington, D. C. by Nannie Helen Burroughs; and racial self-help and enterprise. But the Woman’s Convention also passed resolutions demanding equal rights and justice for African Americans.

As with practically any scholarly work, there are concerns that
might be expressed regarding its inclusions, omissions, or interpretations. First, while Dr. Higginbotham elected to focus upon the activity of black women within the U.S., I believe that her fine work would have been additionally augmented by a more complete examination of women in the foreign, and especially African, missions work. Women made tremendous contributions as organizers, fundraisers, and missionaries. Second, I question if the author has inadvertently overdrawn, if only by implicit suggestion, the solidarity between Northern White and Southern Black Baptist women. Third, it appears to this reviewer that her designation of these Black Baptist women leaders as proponents of “feminist theology” is too bold an appellation. As Dr. Higginbotham herself indicates in clear terms, these women by and large did not insist upon absolute gender equality in the Baptist circles of leadership; most notably they did not push for the ordination of women as ministers or pastors. Perhaps a term such as “protofeminist” or “feminine theology” might reflect better precision. Finally, and related to the preceding point, even should one argue that based upon the historical context these women’s theologizing might be regarded as feminist in nature, why not employ the term “womanist,” a scholarly term that deals most specifically with Black women and their commitment to end both gender and racial discrimination? The author certainly makes the point that this dual goal characterized Baptist women leaders during the 1880-1920 era. It also characterizes a number of women religion academics and religious leaders during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

These critical reservations notwithstanding, Dr. Higginbotham has presented us with a very solid piece of scholarship. As stated previously, the book is well-organized and clearly written with fine documentation and some impressive contemporary photographs. She employs a vast collection of primary and secondary sources and uses them creatively and insightfully. Basically, Dr. Higginbotham does not attempt to betray her sources by taking
the reader where research materials will not permit. She avoids making grandiose claims and engaging in sloganeering. To say that we should appreciate this book is a vast understatement. We must treasure it. Where else can we learn of the contributions of Nannie Helen Burroughs, Virginia Broughton, Mary V. Parrish Cook, Emma De LaMotta, Emma B. Delaney, Sarah Willie Layten, or of the assistance to women of Black male ministers such as William J. Simmons and White females such as Sophia Packard? Not many places. I have no hesitancy whatsoever in encouraging everyone to purchase this important text, read it, and use it in research, classrooms, churches, and discussion groups. I believe it will become a standard by which all future research in Baptist and women religious history will be measured.

Sandy Dwayne Martin
The University of Georgia


Bauckham, N.T. professor at St. Andrew’s University in Scotland, has written an outstanding theological interpretation of Revelation. This volume is one of the first in the New Testament Theology series under the general editorship of James D.G. Dunn. Bauckham’s *Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* contains much of this in more detail; however, some arguments are new and stimulating.

The first chapter discusses the relationship between early Christian prophecy and worship. He argues that early Christian prophecy took place normally within worship as the word of God reported to the people of God at worship. Bauckham also is sensitive to the fact that Revelation is also a well-crafted, complex liter-
ary work. He defines it as a prophetic apocalypse which expands its readers' worldview by disclosing the transcendent, divine plan. In this way, it calls its readers to an uncompromising faithfulness to God (pp. 1-22).

Chapter 2 examines the theological and political dimensions of the phrase “the One who is and who was and who is to come.” John’s trinitarian theology (1:4b-5A) is unique among early Christian writings (p. 24) and has value as a demonstration of Christian trinitarianism free from hellenistic philosophical influence (see p. 164). The author notes that what applies to God also applies to Christ (pp. 25-28; cf. 54-58). He painstakingly examines the references to God, articulates their religious background and demonstrates their respective roles and functions in Revelation. His most important insights, I believe, concern Revelation’s critique of Roman power (pp. 35-39) and the role of worship in Revelation’s doctrine of God (pp. 40-51). The latter discussion is one of many examples of Bauckham’s skillfulness as a theologian.

In chapters 3 and 4, Bauckham discusses the role of christology. He argues that God the Father and Christ Jesus are both divine beings and what defines one defines the other also. The Christ-Lamb is God’s primary means of relating to the world (pp. 54-65). Thus, conquering through suffering is a major motif in Revelation. In chapter 5, he states that the expressions “the word of God,” “the witness of Jesus” and “the witnesses of Jesus” connect God, Christ and the Christian community on earth: just as Jesus was faithful to the word of God, so too the witnesses of Jesus must be faithful to the witness of Jesus. Central to this concern for faithful witness are three themes: (1) the messianic war; (2) the eschatological exodus; (3) witness.

Pneumatology is the focus of chapter 5. Revelation’s pneumatology is expressed in two phrases. “The seven spirits of God” symbolize the completeness of God’s Spirit active in the world. “The Spirit” refers to prophetic activity among Christians. “Both
are the witness of Jesus and the word of God” (p. 121).

The New Jerusalem (chapter 6) examines the role of cities in general and the New Jerusalem in particular. While the New Jerusalem and Babylon/Rome are polar opposites spiritually, they share outward splendor and political dominion. Both the contrasts and the similarities are intentional. While Babylon gained its splendor from the exploitation of human beings, the New Jerusalem gained its splendor from the Godhead and the righteousness of its citizenry (pp. 126-43).

Chapter 7 discusses the contemporary relevance of Revelation as a prophetic book (see esp. pp. 148-56) and lists 11 contributions which Revelation can make to contemporary theological issues and concerns (see esp. 165-69).

Though at points I disagree with Bauckham (e.g., his position that the sealed scroll in Rev. 5:1-8:1 and the little scroll in Rev. 11 are the same scroll [pp. 80-84]), overall I found this book well worth reading. It is well written, rigorously argued, ably supported, stimulating and insightful to the point of making the Book of Revelation intelligible. Also, Bauckham is an able biblical scholar who understands theological nuances and communicates them clearly and logically.

What Leonard Thompson has done for our understanding of the literary composition and socio-historical context of Revelation, Bauckham has done for a better theological understanding of Revelation. This is a book which must be taken into consideration in any future theological discussions of the Book of Revelation.

Thomas B. Slater
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My comments about the book Stony the Road We Trod will address three issues: 1) the claims made by the book and how they are met; 2) the methods employed; 3) the role played by social location.

1. The claims made by the book and how they are met. “The presupposition of this book is that we must engage the new challenge to recapture the ancient biblical vision of racial and ethnic pluralism as shaped by the Bible’s own universalism” (Preface p. ix). This statement itself presumes that the conventional way of understanding the biblical tradition has lost or blurred the Bible’s vision of racial and ethnic pluralism. This prior presupposition is one which I share with the authors of the articles that comprise this collection. In my judgment, each article, in its own way, demonstrates the limitations of a Eurocentric world view and thus succeeds in: (1) uncovering racial and ethnic pluralism where customarily it has been overlooked by biblical interpretation; (2) unmasking the inadequacy of a world view and/or interpretive approach that overlooked or concealed such pluralism.

2. The methods employed. For the most part, the methods employed in the articles are contemporary and critical. They include both historical- and literary-critical approaches. When traditional African American ways of hearing and reading are described (e.g., Shannon’s analysis of an ante-bellum sermon or Wimbush’s examination of different ways of reading), or when technical methods are criticized (e.g., Myers), it is done from a critical point of view. However, there is a distinctiveness to these critical approaches that stems from the social location of the interpreters and the particular values, concerns, and insights that they bring to their work.

Each article is well documented. This not only represents
the depth and extent of the scholarship exemplified in the volume, but it is invaluable to readers who, like the present writer, are unfamiliar with aspects of African American religious history and current scholarship.

3. The role played by social location. While I am quite interested in sociological methods of biblical interpretation, it is primarily insights into the role played by the social location of the interpreters that most excites me. I believe that such insights are significant because they provide new ways of understanding the text, of understanding interpretation itself, of recognizing the limitations of one’s own world view, and of appreciating the world view of another. Therefore, my evaluation of the merits of the book are made against this backdrop.

Issues of social location are taken quite seriously by each of the authors. Accordingly, several interpretive shifts take place. Regarding the first shift, there is a movement away from the prevailing Eurocentric perspective to one that reflects African American concerns. This movement has been prompted by the dilemma facing African American interpreters who, on the one hand, engage in critical investigation that presumes a Eurocentric world view and interpretive approach and, on the other hand, belong to believing communities that regard sources other than the biblical tradition as near-canonical (Myers). Critical analysis of the role played by social location helps one to realize that reading (which is always a form of interpreting) is itself a social convention, and one’s interpretive community regulates which reading strategies are authoritative and which are not (Weems). Because of its own distinctive way of understanding color when it is used to define people, critical African American reading has perceived Black presence throughout ancient Israel’s history where traditional reading has not (Copher, Bailey). Throughout the history of the African American community, the Bible has acted as a kind of language-world analogous to its own world, and the biblical message has been understood
accordingly (Wimbush). I find these hermeneutical claims and approaches quite compatible with the dynamics of tradition development and the principles of canonical criticism and, because of my own interest in these areas, I hope to pursue some of these ideas.

Regarding a second interpretive shift, the historical-critical insistence on the primacy of authorial intent yields to the interpretive role played by pressing contemporary issues such as racism or intercultural dialogue. While technical scholarship, traditional methods of interpretation, and Black experience all contribute to African American hermeneutics, it seems that here the question of biblical authority rests less in the answers given than in the questions asked, and these questions relate to issues of culture and imagination (Hoyt). The advantage of this cultural perception and imagination is illustrated in analyses of selected passages (Waters, Martin, and Lewis), where a corrective to the Eurocentric tendency of reading its own racial and ethnic bias into the biblical accounts thus distorting the meaning of the text is provided. The African-American experience of oppression and bondage gave birth to a culture and imagination which in turn shaped unique hermeneutical principles. I think that principles such as of contextuality, correlation, confrontation, and consolation (Shannon) offer creative possibilities for constructing a contemporary focus of interpretation. It suggests that their applicability be tested.

Finally, the foundational theological proposition upon which African American biblical hermeneutics rests is neither creation nor liberation nor eschatology, as is found in other theological paradigms, but the universal parenthood of God from which flows the universal kinship of humankind. Accordingly, the authors disavow all interpretation of Scripture that attempt to legitimate any form of human bondage. The theme of the universal parenthood of God challenges both the sacralization of any ideological concept which serves the vested interests of a particular ethnic/racial group, and the secularization of a concept that is fun-
damentally religious yet not universally held (Felder).

All of this praise notwithstanding, I found myself wondering what Myers meant when he discussed the roles played by non-biblical sources and different normative canonical stances. While I agree both on the importance of such sources and stances and the limitation and distortion of the dominant stance, I do believe that we still have to deal with the parameters of the canon, whether we find its contents inclusive enough or not. I further believe that even within its canonical limitations, the biblical testimonies are multivalent. The primary task of interpretation is precisely to uncover dimensions of this multivalence. If Myers is suggesting something otherwise, when he claims that the control of the final form is broken by other sources and stances, or if any of the other authors hold that position, we would be somewhat at variance on that point.

Finally, in addition to all that has been said above, I am particularly grateful for Wimbush’s summary of the history of African American biblical reading, the womanist insights of Weems and Martin, Copher’s summary of Black presence in the Bible (I have already used this article in both my Introduction and my Pentateuch courses), and the superb footnotes that every author included. All of this has provided me with opportunities to move beyond my own limited world view.

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Every racial or ethnic or religious group, no matter how oppressed has an elite. Afro-Americans are no exception. Since
ante-bellum times, Black folk have had a small aristocracy that has attempted to exert leadership and influence over the race. The Black elite in the ante-bellum era was extremely small and consisted of free Blacks in the North who had prospered through the provision of personal services to Whites, such as catering, barbering, livery services, etc. In the ante-bellum South there was an even tinier free Black elite, some of whom were slaveowners, concentrated in and around Charleston and New Orleans. Many members of the ante-bellum Black elite North and South descended from slaveowners who bequeathed cash or property to them. Consequently many had a quite fair complexion.

With the coming of freedom, the Black elites in the North and South expanded as Reconstruction opened up numerous opportunities for Black politicians, officeholders, and businessmen in the South. With the end of Reconstruction and the erosion of Black upward mobility in the South and elsewhere, the Black aristocracy in the last quarter of the 19th and first quarter of the twentieth century hunkered down in various Southern and Northern urban areas, especially in Washington D.C. With their elite status based on education, white collar and professional jobs, and family background (including White ancestry) the late 19th and early 20th century Black elite tried to set the tone for the entire race. It is their story that Willard B. Gatewood, a noted historian of the Black experience and a professor at the University of Arkansas, tells.

Gatewood organizes his work into four parts, each with a prologue describing the changes that Blanche K. Bruce, a leading Black Reconstruction era politician and aristocrat, and his family went through over the years. Part One gives the background and antecedents of the Black aristocracy. Parts Two and Three describe the Black elites of Washington D.C., "the Capital of the Colored Aristocracy", then the Black elites of the Midwest, Northeast and the South. In his examination of these Black folk, Gatewood describes their exclusiveness, emphasis on proper, upper class
behavior, pride in their ancestry, and preoccupation with skin color. Most of the Black aristocrats described were ministers, doctors, lawyers, educators, businessmen, journalists, and federal office holders. Their numbers were extremely small in relation to the rest of the Black community. As a result they were isolated from the masses of blacks and considered insignificant by Whites. Not helping matters was the Black aristocracy’s tendency to shun the denominations favored by rank and file Blacks such as the Black Baptist and AME and AME Zion denominations. Instead the Black elite and their ministers favored more elitist denominations such as the Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches.

Despite the social distance between the Black elite and the rest of the race, they still suffered from racism as did their less fortunate brethren. Barred from the country clubs, theaters, restaurants, opera houses and first class travel accommodations their income and status entitled them to, the Black elite were in the forefront of the efforts roll back the spread of Jim Crow in the early 1900s and formed the main source of opposition to Booker T. Washington’s policies of racial accommodation. According to Gatewood many of Black aristocrats believed that if Black working class and poor folk adopted their genteel culture and habits then Blacks in general would be held in higher esteem by Whites, thereby mitigating or ending White racism.

With that in mind the Black elite at the turn of the century through their church and social club activities attempted to “uplift” the Black masses. Various charitable and educational activities were extended to poor Black folk to help lift them out of their misery and despair. These activities could go but so far given the limited resources available to the Black elite and the suspicion in which they were held by the rest of the Black community because of their snobbery and color consciousness.

Gatewood concludes his book with an examination of the changes undergone by the Black elite down through the 1920s.
Changes in the economy and the great migration of Blacks from the South to Northern cities changed the character of the Black aristocracy. Status among this group now more depended on wealth rather than family background, education, or skin color, though these were still important factors. The mushroom growth of Northern urban Black populations provided new opportunities for Black entrepreneurs, ministers, educators, and politicians. Consequently a new Black elite developed during the 1920s, gradually supplanting the older, more genteel elite.

*Aristocrats of Color* is an extremely useful study of a neglected topic in Afro-American history. The Black elite has rarely been studied and there are few works on them as comprehensive as this. In evaluating the Black elite, Gatewood properly takes them to task for their snobbery, color consciousness, and unrealistic belief that if all Blacks acted like them racism would abate. Yet he points out, and rightfully so, that the Black elite in the period studied took a far greater interest in the overall Black community than the White elite did in its community. Linked more closely to the Black community by White racism then than now, the Black elite described by Gatewood did in its way try to provide leadership, role models, and moral and social tone to their community. Not so with today’s Black aristocrats who seem unable to provide clear vision, leadership or social standards to the African American community.

Hayward Farrar  
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I found this book interesting, enlightening, persuasive and sensitive to women’s struggle for equality in the Christian commu-
Moltmann-Wendel’s style of writing is clear and her concept of imagination in biblical interpretation compelling.

Moltmann-Wendel argues that the Bible, written and basically interpreted from the male perspective, is more “his story” than a story of and for both men and women. Christian history actually began as a history of men and women but was not recorded from that perspective. Recognizing that women have been largely ignored in the writing and interpreting of history, the author seeks to remove the burden of the past which is recorded from the patriarchal perspective and to shed some light on the significance of some of the women in the New Testament.

According to the author, the Bible hands down men’s thoughts about God and about liberation through Jesus; however, she asks if the Bible had been written from the female perspective, what would the story be like? She responds that it would be quite different and believes that, according to the early Christian witness, women have not been given a fair deal. Moltmann-Wendel notes that the writers of the Bible give women roles as the weaker sex, servants, sisters, wives, and often associate them with sexual sinfulness. These traditions about women, she argues, are oppressive rather than liberating. They make total freedom and self-awareness hard to realize for some women. This causes some women to experience alienation from the Bible and regard it as an instrument of their suppression.

The author seems very much aware of the fact that overcoming centuries of biased interpretations within and concerning the Bible will not be an easy task; nor will this problem be solved easily. Nevertheless, it is important and necessary for women to rediscover themselves within the early Christian witness as having vital roles within the early Christian community. She calls for a rediscovery of the art of imagination in theology and lists eight ways in which this might be done in hermeneutics: (1) rediscover the matriarchal traditions through the use of art and culture; (2)
attempt to reintegrate into the contemporary church and society women of the Old Testament who have been recognized in literature and have not gained their recognition in the church; (3) take a new look at women in the Bible considering their biographies, human features, and personalities; (4) through the aforementioned stories work out an evolving understanding of Christian society, asking how these stories strike us now; (5) be courageous enough to be subjective and open to rejecting any passages in the Bible that are oppressive to women; (6) change patriarchal metaphors to feminine ones; (7) interpret the Bible as a whole, i.e., being sensitive to the feminine perspective and avoiding passages that alienate; (8) re-tell history with new narrative forms, giving life to the stories so that they can stand alongside our own lives. “Where God is experienced as a liberating force the Bible discloses countless new possibilities” (p. 11). I found numbers two through four most striking because they provide means to make the positive roles and contributions of women in the Bible meaningful to all persons in the contemporary church.

Moltmann-Wendel uses creative imagination and perception, combined with her knowledge of Scripture, to present the roles of some of the women around Jesus in a new light. She also takes a look at the differing ways in which women have been portrayed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Finally, she looks at ways in which these women have been re-presented in literature and art.

Her use of imagination in theology is a definite strength of this book. Imagination, as defined here by Moltmann-Wendel, helps the reader to attain a different understanding of women’s role in the early Christian community. Her careful exploration of the New Testament and comparisons of the Gospel writers give new insight into interpretation.

One weakness of the book is that it does not explore in greater depth the social background that might have influenced the writers of Scripture. The book does this to some degree in dis-
cussing Luke. Had this been done more thoroughly with each Gospel writer, perhaps the book would have been even richer and might help us to understand better the evangelists' views of women around Jesus.

Despite the above criticism, this book makes a significant contribution into the role of women in the New Testament. By demonstrating the significant contributions of women, Moltmann-Wendel enables the reader to identify with these women and to use them as role-models. Having done so, women may be able to gain courage and to fulfill roles within the Christian community. This book presents New Testament women as female role-models, ones with whom contemporary women can identify.

Renea Denise Slater
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