INTELLECTUAL FAITH PRACTITIONERS: AFRICAN AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE TWENTIETH-FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

The first component of our mission as intellectual-faith-practitioners is to carve out epistemological space so that we chronicle intergenerational and multigenerational life paths to God, our Creator and Sustainer. The second component is this; theological educators must grasp the innermost, nitty-gritty essentials of the canon within the canon, in order to broaden our religious imagination through paradigms of cross-cultural and intergenerational interactions. Those of us in the inner circle, responsible for training the next generation of religious leaders, we must decode, decipher, and translate that which is present and available, but is not readily assessable or recognizable. KT

As African American *intellectual faith practitioners*, I want to delineate two theoretical coordinates that impact the ongoing development of Black theological education in the 21st century.

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1. To Think

African American professors and students of religion must raise the bar and set high standards in using analytical tools that probe silences, erasures, gaps, and distortions about Black Christians as God-talkers and faith walkers. Living in our postmodern world, we must bring reason and research to bear on the realities of academic politics, wherein far too often the study of Black Religion is pushed to the margins, due to inattention, the impulse to cut corners, lack of vital engagement, conventional answers, and conceptual timidity. Thus, the first component of our mission as intellectual-faith-practitioners is to carve out epistemological space so that we chronicle intergenerational and multigenerational life paths to God, our Creator and Sustainer. We are called to exegete circumstances in the dailiness of life that whisper grace within our incarnational social selves. In other words, it is crucial for educated clergy to know how to debunk, unmask, and disentangle the uneasy alliance between imperial power and its suffering underside—looted indigenous populations, trampled religious cultures, and neo-slavery regulated by globalizing terrorist force. We must use our knowledge about right and wrong, about good and evil, to speak truth and expose lies.

According to the Reverend Doctor Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, (January 12, 1880 – September 10, 1976), the first African American president of Howard University, who traveled some 25,000 miles a year speaking about the love and providence of a just and holy God, our first task is to think. Rev. Dr. Johnson articulated this core belief this way: "I have traveled the world and on every soil, what I have found is those who think, govern those who toil."[2] Our confidence should grow from the conviction that there is a large body of ecumenical and interdenominational religious data about obedience to God's will that we inherited but we have not yet fully actualized— testimonies of survival

[2] Richard I. McKinney, *Mordecai – The Man and His Message: The Story of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson* (Wash. D.C.: Howard Univ. Pr., 1997); Michael R. Winston, ed. *Education for Freedom: A Documentary Tribute to Celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Election of Mordecai W. Johnson as President of Howard University* (Wash., D.C.: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, 1976); Rayford W. Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867-1967*(NYU Pr., 1969).

and embedded retentions of indigenous African religions that call us to deepen both our faith and our scholarship.

Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson, (December 19, 1875 – April 3, 1950), historian, author, journalist and the founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History summed up the challenge to cultivate our minds in this way:

> If you control a man's thinking, you don't have to worry about his actions. If you can determine what a man thinks, you do not have to worry about what he will do. If you can make a man believe that he is inferior, you don't have to compel him to seek an inferior status, he will do so without being told, and if you can make a man believe he is justly an outcast, you don't have to order him to the back door, he will go to the back door on his own and if there is no back door, the very nature of the man will demand that you build one.[3]

Minister Malcolm X, (May 19, 1925 – February 21, 1965), assessed this type of non-thinking at its most destructive manifestation as "rape of the psyche."[4]

What distinguish African American theological education in the 21st century are the ongoing analytical methodologies in our curricula, instructional styles, and emancipatory exercises that allow us to read Christian history via the theological narratives of enslaved Africans via our most immediate fore-parents. Black Christians' epistemology offers particular compelling visions of love for neighbor and justice-making-ministries for our communities.

Part of the larger effort of Dr. Charles H. Long, one of the founders of the Society for the Study of Black Religion, is to get us "to think with,

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[3] Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Wash., D.C.: The Associated Pub., 1933); Jacqueline Anne Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ Pr., 1997).

[4] Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (NY: Penguin Modern Classics, 2010); Malcolm X *By Any Means Necessary: Malcolm X Speeches and Writing*, 2nd edition (NY: Pathfinders Pr., 1992).

to think through, and to think about thinking in the study of religion." [5] He makes a strong case for addressing the family-ghost of the Middle Passage that required African people to think with their bodies in the midst of horrific terror. Long contends that transatlantic slavery was the beginning of the democratization of evil in the modern world.

> Enslaved people who were thrust into the Atlantic world had to find a new power of being. African women, men, and children had to find a power that would sustain their human being-ness because the powers-that-be would not sustain them. There had to be some other worldview than the vision of Europeans from maritime Christian countries who were running the 40,000 slave ships that traveled the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. There had to be some other kind of condition of being a human being than the one put forth by the practitioners of democracy who lied and cheated, who stole and lynched, who raped anytime they wanted with impunity. So African people in the Americas created a new ontology in order to live in the New World.[6]

This sensitivity to our ontology and contextuality destabilizes White norms as the standard for training the next generation of clergy and religious educators.

Based on cultural milieu and socio-political settings, the stories about the various ways we learn to think with our bodies serve as counter-narratives that offer a persistent critique of the received traditional interpretations of scripture and doctrine lying beneath ecclesiastical organizations. Such texts demonstrate how the kinetic mining of African Americans' religious subjectivity situated in particular time and specific place is central to justice-making transformation.

Particularly, when Christians cultivate thinking as a spiritual discipline, we not only challenge the basic assumptions and prevailing

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[5] Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* 2nd ed (Davies Group Pub., 2004).

[6] Notes from a lecture delivered by Charles H. Long, April 2, 2002, at Virginia Union School of Theology in Richmond, VA.

paradigms in our inherited traditions, but we become part of a larger effort that enables women and men, youth and adults to engage in faithful acts of resistance. As members of the body of Christ, the Black Church's internal criterion requires intellectual faith practitioners throughout the African Diaspora to critique hegemonic normative logic that holds institutionalized oppression in place. Clergy and laity must seriously analyze facts that disadvantage members of our communities, so that we can teach others how to withhold obedience from those who have been given official status in institutions and agencies and yet they defraud and exploit the masses.

2. To Celebrate

Now, the second half of our 21st century mission as intellectual-faith-practitioners is to celebrate liturgical praxis and sacramental rites that intersect localized congregations with the globalized Church. Filled with holy boldness, we understand corporate worship as a time to replenish as we go forth heeding the cries of humanity and the environment, no matter the cost.

In the face of deep economic and social divisions among African peoples, on the continent and throughout the Diaspora, we as God-fearing Christians are called to create a just world. Knowing how to think critically is not enough. We must apply, preserve, and transmit from generation to generation received wisdom that spring forth from deeply-held feelings and religious beliefs. Moving between thinking and participating in the sacramental rites of African American parishioners who symbolically codify God's continuous revelation within creation is the essence of culturally sensitive liturgical praxis.

Zora Neale Hurston, (January 7, 1891 – January 28, 1961), the most prolific Black woman writer in the USA from 1925 to 1960, and a cultural anthropologist, presents a profound challenge to seminary students and professors. Hurston argued that it is essential for people living in situations of oppression to create our own camouflaged system of

signals, attitudes, habits, and artifacts. We must investigate those who willfully indoctrinated us into centuries-old customs, habits, myths, mores, written as well as unwritten commandments that do not embrace our well-being.

Hurston cautioned those who are severely disadvantaged by systemic racism, gender-specific modes of subjugation, and hoity-toity class elitism, that we must be very careful when it comes to sharing with others the wisdom embedded in our communities. Hurston says that too often, far too often, outsiders who study us will use the very data regarding our prevailing beliefs and cultural conventions as strategic boomerangs to ricochet back and destroy us. The masked unconsciousness of African Americans is feather-bed resistance, thickly textured coded socio-religious-cultural practices that signal conscious tactical maneuvers that protect cherished insider-information.

Here in the 21st century theological educators must grasp the innermost, nitty-gritty essentials of the canon within the canon, in order to broaden our religious imagination through paradigms of cross-cultural and intergenerational interactions. Those of us in the inner circle, responsible for training the next generation of religious leaders, we must decode, decipher, and translate that which is present and available, but is not readily assessable or recognizable. The path-breaking, prophetic sermons, music, prayers, proverbs, confessions, ceremonies and special occasions created by Black Christians bring to the forefront life-texts that previously have been either ignored, dismissed, or under-theologized. Specifically, our task is to record the God-talk of the muted voices of those most dispossessed.

And as we read, partake, and celebrate new information and sacred rituals, we need to wrestle with these types of questions: what is the faith formation we received, the religious teachings bequeathed to us, the teaching about the Divine that we are heirs to? We must come to terms with the spirit-guides who advise and inspire us, the spirit-guides who attend to and direct us. How can we most effectively digest and assimilate this theological food for our souls?" What are effective ways to connect creators of new knowledge both to the traditional fields in theological education and yet beyond the ivory tower to a wider world with broader constituencies of religious concerns?

More than three decades ago when I entered Johnson C. Smith Seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Professor G. Murray Branch lectured with prophetic authority about how everybody does not possess the know-out regarding the shifting geographies that frame transoceanic interconnectivity and complex webs of reciprocity. In one of his unforgettable Old Testament classes Dr. Branch proclaimed "everything that we need in life comes from the land, except for love and sunshine."

So, here in the second decade of the 21st century, let us engage in rigorous inventory concerning the following: what are we doing to enhance our imagination, energy, and unswerving critique of state-sanctioned -isms and increasing inequities among the growing number of landless people? What is God laying on our heart-of-hearts about effective ways to do ministry with and among those who are banished from their plot and province, dispersed from habitation and homestead, displaced from humble abode and familiar address, ostracized from the dusty dirt and gritty ground where they were born, deported from and made a fugitive-on-the-run, immigrants and refugees from the only residential place and living spaces that they call home?

As stewards of divinely entrusted material possessions, charged with the sacred responsibility of justice-praxis for members of our species and the wider environment in which we are situated, our true worship of God is evidenced in a love ethic that is expressed in mutual equality, a process of making genuine, demonstrable, honest-to-goodness, right-relating connections with all living things—humans, animals, plants, microorganisms as well as minerals and others; components of the cosmos, in order to mend, to repair, to revitalize, and to make healthy the Earth and all that is in it, on it, around it, and in between. All in all, at the core of our theological understanding, we affirm that a God-pleasing faith must find expression between the only two coordinates that matter: thinking and doing.

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