

BY CHARLES SHELBY ROOKS

“The First Dozen Years Are the Hardest”

This article is about an idea: the need to increase the number of theologically trained black clergy in the United States. It is also inextricably an autobiographical statement simply because, in pursuit of the idea, I have been drawn to the center of much of the contemporary ferment in theological education concerning the preparation of blacks for Christian ministry. The Fund for Theological Education, Inc., which I serve, has been and continues to be a very prestigious platform for a freelance critic, consultant, innovator and prodder in theological education and church circles. Thus the idea, the person and platform merge, and it is the story of a dozen hard years that I wish to record.

In September, 1960, I left a church in Washington, D. C. to undertake responsibility for recruiting black students for theological seminaries and for administering a national program of financial aid for their support. Those are two separate things, but equally important. You may recall that 1960 was a year in which profound, and sometimes violent, change began to occur in the lives of Black American citizens. In February of that year, four young Black college students had sat down at a Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. From that simple beginning, the twentieth century grass roots revolt of the black man in this country grew and spread across the nation until even the President of the United States was saying to the Congress, “We shall overcome.” Although we are too close to the decade of the 1960’s to assess it properly, I think it safe to say that it was one of the most unique decades in the history of man’s eternal struggle for freedom on this globe. It was at the outset of that historic period that I began my own love-hate relationship with theological education. The changes which have taken place since in theological education are, in their own way, striking and historic.

The job I have grown out of a concern among a large number of people, a concern upon which a few could focus and offer support. Supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Department of Ministry of the National Council of Churches brought together seventy churchmen, black and white, at Seabury House in Connecticut in March 1959. That consultation made a good many recommendations designed to improve the content and condition of theological education for blacks. It is interesting, however, that the only concrete development issuing from that conference, was not the implementation of any of its recommendations but the creation of a recruiting and fellowship effort undertaken by the Fund for Theological Education, and underwritten by Sealantic Fund, Inc. That may tell you something about consultation.

This paper was delivered at Conrad in Ohio during a Worship on “Teaching The Black Experience.”

Three men were largely responsible for this 1960 beginning — two of whom had been at Seabury: Walter Wagoner, then Executive Director of the Fund, and Dana Creel and Yorke Allen, Jr., staff officers for Sealantic Fund. Messrs. Creel's and Allen's interest in the theological education of blacks is quite deliberately not a matter of very much public knowledge, but I am convinced it was they who persuaded the Board of Directors of Sealantic Fund to underwrite both the building of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta to the tune of several million dollars over a period of ten years, and the support of the fellowship activities of the Fund for Theological Education specifically in behalf of blacks in the amount of nearly two million dollars by the end of this academic year. With these monies, the Fund has supported 190 blacks in first professional degree programs who have received 354 awards to date, plus an additional 35 persons at doctoral level. All this is a most significant effort out of the Rockefeller family largesse which has never received the public attention it deserves. I want publicly to pay tribute to it for both its quantity and consistency for it is virtually the *only* significant base of financial support blacks have had in theological education up to this point, and it has been profoundly important.

When I came to the Fund for Theological Education, I really didn't know what I was getting into. Of course, I had graduated from a theological school, but that was virtually all I knew about seminary training. I soon discovered I had a bear by the tail! The first thing that impressed me was how alone I was. Except for ITC, Howard and the other black seminaries, the only black faculty or administrators in theological education were at Drew, Garrett, Wesley and the University of Chicago. Just to give you an idea of what that means, listen to this: in 1960, Eric Lincoln had just received his Ph.D.; Preston Williams was still at Penn State, and Lawrence Jones at Fisk; Joe Washington and Chuck Long were doctoral candidates, although Chuck was teaching at Chicago; Bill Jones had completed his B.D. only two years earlier; Lyn Walker was beginning his college work; Evans Crawford had been Dean of the Chapel at Howard for three years; Charles Brown was a middler at United Seminary; Jim Cone was a middler at Garrett; and Marshall Grigsby was just entering high school! That doesn't cover everybody currently in significant positions in American theological education, but it does give some idea of the awful loneliness of my position as a black man in theological education.

If the faculty situation was bad, the student situation was equally bad. At the Seabury Consultation in 1959, Harry Richardson, the first President of ITC, reported that in 1958-59 there were 387 black B.D. candidates in 66 theological schools in the U.S., 177 in so-called "white" seminaries, 210 in seven Negro seminaries. And the situation actually deteriorated from there! My own survey of black B.D. candidates in 1963-64, five years later, uncovered only 285 persons in the fully accredited schools plus another 75 in the associate member schools for

a total of 360. It was a lonely time for me, then, for want of the company of a significant number of black compatriots in theological education — faculty, administrators, or students.

I am tremendously pleased, of course, that we have begun to see some real gains in these respects. Three black men now serve in key administrative posts in predominantly white schools — Lawrence Jones as Dean of the Faculty at Union, David Shannon as Dean of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and Gilbert Caldwell as Dean of New York Seminary. According to the *Fact Book of Theological Education 1972-73*, there are currently 61 full-time black faculty in all AATS schools, 20 serving in primarily black seminaries and 41 serving in primarily white ones. Ten are full professors in primarily white schools. Yet, although these figures represent an advance over the picture even four years ago, the percentage of black teachers in theological education is only 3.5% and increased only 0.3% between 1971-72 and 1972-73. In addition, there are only 22 black administrators out of a total of 864 in all such positions in all AATS schools, including the primarily black ones; and only 11 blacks of 526 library staff in all schools. Such statistics show clearly that, while some gains have been made, percentage-wise blacks are not catching up.

The major gain we have made has been in the increased number of black seminarians over the past four years. The survey of the AATS Committee on the Black Religious Experience in 1968-69 uncovered 665 black Americans in all seminary degree programs. Four years later, in the 1972-73 academic year, there were 1061 such students, 952 of whom were in pre-ordination degree programs. The 1061 included 92 black women and 56 doctoral candidates. For four years we have been in a period where the growth rate was an average of 100 additional blacks per year. What is significant here is that I am no longer alone in recruiting blacks for seminaries. It was never a job I could do alone anyway. Now there are nearly a dozen people in theological education who have recruiting blacks as one of their specific responsibilities. That means that the numbers situation is bound to improve.

When you look beyond the increased actual numbers of black faculty and students — a phenomenon that dates back only to 1968 — there really hasn't been a great deal of improvement in the situation of blacks. The fundamental question is not how many blacks there are who are being educated in AATS seminaries, but what *kind* of education do they receive? Does that education prepare them adequately for the kinds of ministry they will have? Almost universally the response of blacks themselves to those two questions is emphatically negative. And the continuing difficulty has been to find some adequate way to get these questions discussed seriously.

One of the basic theses under which we have operated in the Fund for Theological Education has been the belief that, if we could produce enough able black people for the tasks we have, the whole picture of

seminary education for blacks would improve, the proper questions would get asked and the quality of the education for everyone would be enhanced. It was partly for this reason that our Fund in 1969 transformed our doctoral program to a program only for blacks who intend to teach at the collegiate or seminary level. The other part of the reason was that, in the face of an oversupply of Ph.D.'s in Religion, we could no longer justify a doctoral program except on these new terms. In addition to the small number of black faculty in the 1968-69 academic year, we had only 18 blacks studying for a doctor's degree that year in American Theological Seminaries. Few blacks were even considering such a degree, and few were being admitted to doctoral programs. In 1968-69, for instance, Union, Yale, Harvard, and Chicago did not have half-a-dozen black doctoral candidates between them. And in the fifteen years prior to that Chicago had produced one black Ph.D., Harvard 3, Union 1 and Yale none. I was convinced, therefore, that a fundamental need was the production of black scholars. Only thus would the educational experiences of blacks in seminaries improve. But, because it takes so long to produce a competent scholar, our progress in getting the right questions asked has been retarded. This is one reason we are not very far ahead in raising and answering the tough curriculum questions that are the real heart of the Black Studies dilemma.

Even while producing people, however, it was necessary to do something about the climate of acceptance in theological education. Over all the years of such education in this country, seminaries had paid little attention to the black religious experience. Even when attention was given it was scant and usually tended to equate or compare black experience with what seemed to be similar phenomena among whites. It was necessary, therefore, to find some way by which new questions could have a hearing even while those questions were in the infancy of their articulation.

In order to help create this climate, I took on the responsibility in 1968 of chairing a special AATS Committee on the Black Religious Experience. It is interesting to note that, of the fourteen persons who served on the Committee, only five were connected in any way with a predominantly white theological school. One of the five was a Roman Catholic, and only two had full-time teaching responsibilities. In a sense, therefore, we were outsiders trying to speak to the seminary establishment. And it wasn't easy. Our major efforts were two-fold: (1) the production of a report which would attempt comprehensively to raise the fundamental questions about curriculum in relation to black religious experience; and (2) the gathering together of faculty and students, black and white, who would attempt in some fundamental way to outline the possibilities that serious discussion of black experience holds for every division of the seminary curriculum. Both things were done, the latter in February 1970, the former in June 1970. In addition, I spent the 1970-71 academic year as a Special Staff Consultant to AATS, giving

the fifth quarter of my time to discussion of the report with seminary faculties across the country. It was an effort to get the conversation going and hopefully moving in the right direction.

At the same time these things were going on, it was also clear that the few blacks we had in theological education needed to find some ways through which they could discuss their own perceptions of what was going on and what needed to be done. We found ourselves in need of mutual support and fellowship. Almost without conscious pre-intent, we finally organized what is now known as the Society for the Study of Black Religion and held our first annual meeting in the Fall of 1971. I served as its first and, to date, only President. That Society now has fifty members and one major problem is how to keep the membership small enough so that it can continue to be the working group it was originally intended to be. The fact is we could probably double our membership at the next meeting if we choose to do so. But our major hope is that the Society can support and sustain the impetus for blacks themselves to produce the creative scholarship which will undergird study and research about the black religious experience in all the years ahead.

One further thought needs to be articulated. It has to do with what I call the commitment to excellence. One thing has always been clear to me: that nothing should ever be attempted in educating blacks for ministry that does not strive for excellence. The Protestant Fellowship Program, for instance, has always aimed to find black students for whom no one ever need apologize. And we have found them in plenty, even when no one believed we could. Again, over the past two or three years, some of us were determined that wherever Black Church Studies Programs developed they should be subject to early and periodic scrutiny by other black scholars to make certain they were headed in the direction of excellence. Committees have been formed to do just that at Howard, ITC, Colgate Rochester and in Ohio, just to name a few places, in an effort to assure quality in emerging programs. In addition, I have consistently counseled a good many other schools that seminaries should not get into the business of Black Church Studies, should not recruit black students, should not hire black faculty unless both the institution that seeks them and the persons found are dedicated to the highest quality and excellence. It is this possibility for quality in the use and appropriation of the black religious experience that continually lures me on. However difficult our task may be, whatever its full dimensions turn out eventually to be, what we *all* can give to it is an abiding determination to do our part well.

So much for history. Let me now offer four brief thoughts as a kind of conclusion. First, I don't believe any one person should ever be saddled with all the jobs I have had over the past few years. And I'm exceedingly thankful that it is no longer necessary. I haven't said much in this "autobiography" about the support of Jesse Ziegler and the

AATS. Jesse serves not only as Executive Secretary of AATS, but also as an officer of the Fund for Theological Education. It has been his encouragement in a wide variety of ways that has helped to further the cause of black education. With the addition to the AATS staff of Marshall Grigsby last January and the increase in the numbers of black faculty, the very difficult tasks that remain will have many more hands to do them. I need not tell you I am grateful.

Second, all of us sometimes tend to forget how recent so much of this history is. The real turning point in seminary education for blacks occurred in 1968 — and that is less than five years ago. The deaths of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy had effects that we are unable to assess as yet. I am convinced that it was their deaths that caused the kind of re-evaluation among theological administrators, faculty and students which led to the progress I have indicated in this article, small though much of it is. Most blacks and some whites have responded to the terrible trauma of the 1960's with a much clearer commitment to re-discovery of the black religious experience. I am frequently impatient at the rate or quality of the change we have witnessed, but we have come a long way — as the data indicates. One of the difficulties I have had with myself over the years is that the mass of information which flows into my office enables me to interpret trends and possibilities long before most people. The ideas I have sometimes are formulated before many people are ready to consider them. Often that means a time lag before serious consideration of an idea can begin. I have to fight with myself to keep from becoming too impatient. But progress is being made and our proximity to change must not be allowed to cause us to miss that change. At the same time we cannot relent in the pressure for change, for we have a long, long road still before us. It is a road that blacks and whites must all travel or the dream indeed is dead.

Third, whatever progress has occurred, we are still at the very beginning of what will eventually be needed. Paul Holmer of Yale once took me to task in *Theological Education* for what he called the "Crisis in Rhetoric." At the 1970 AATS meeting, I had attempted to say to seminary administrators, as forcefully as I could, that I did not see evidence of sufficient commitment on the part of theological seminaries, administrators or professors, to the cause of black education and black experience. This "autobiography" should tell you not only why I believe I was perhaps the one person on the theological scene who had a right to say that, but why I felt frustrated enough to say it. But Dr. Holmer rebuked me, saying, "It is . . . time to stop castigating whites as if their stubborn dispositions were the only problem. That simply is not true." He went on to say,

... it will be increasingly the task for all kinds of men to understand the story (of the Black religious experience) in real depth, so that our affections and passions will also be deepened. But such understanding will come piece-meal when it comes, just as it is coming to blacks right now. And there is little point to saying in this everlastingly castigating

manner, that whites "refused" to understand when the fact is that the pieces of information, the sources, the account of the intertwining of disposition, beliefs, and the practices that make up the religious texture of a group, have been so haltingly presented. Though the causes of that state of affairs might also redound to the guilt of mostly the whites, still there is little point to rehearsing that. One soon gets again to the point of diminishing returns if there are these other things, instead, that are to be known." (p. 210f)

In my response to Dr. Holmer, I tried to say, among other things, that the almost universal perception of blacks is that white theological schools have not yet exhibited the depth of commitment which will permit either blacks or whites "to understand the story in real depth." Only one Cluster of seminaries in the entire U.S. has ever gathered its faculties for any in-depth consideration of what it means fundamentally to include the black experience in its *academic* life. The usual patterns have been to hire one or two blacks for the faculty and let them go their own way. The more basic necessity is to ask what the black experience means for each academic discipline and how we go about including the perceptions of black experience in those disciplines. My rhetoric may be excessive. Since I am not a scholar, my understanding of how scholars operate may be faulty. But what I look for and fail to see in any general way across theological education is the basic commitment on the part of white people to the creation of some continuing context in which whites as well as blacks, together as well as separately, can look for both particular and universal meaning in black experience. That is the task that remains to be done. I do not see any indication of a new and wider commitment in theological education to the understanding of black experience as yet in either primarily white or primarily black seminaries. And I believe that is an eminently fair statement of the contemporary facts.

Fourth and finally, all of us need to be aware that the thrust for including black experience in theological curricula is in danger of being aborted before it is born. The February 1973 issue of the Danforth Foundation *News and Notes* contains this observation:

For many reasons, black studies — albeit still a phenomenon — appears a phenomenon of a lesser order in 1973 than it promised in 1969. Very few institutions have student enrollments — black or white — which match their predictions and expectations. The appearance of parallel fields such as Chicano, American Indians, and Women's studies has led critics to claim that Black Studies was the first of a series of fads, none of them with serious staying power. Their competition has also contributed to stringent budget situations which have been cited as justification for reduced budget commitments to Black Studies in many institutions. It remains as difficult to generalize about Black Studies in 1973 as it was in 1969. As one Danforth Black Studies Fellow recently wrote the Foundation: "Black Studies continues to be the most exciting, frustrating, and rewarding discipline I know." Some experts (notably John Blassingame of Yale) maintain that there is still a shortage of faculty qualified to teach Black Studies and that this has caused a slowing down of Black Studies Program development. Others point to unemployed black faculty and charge lagging institutions with hypocrisy or timidity or worse.

Black Studies continues to suffer — as does the nation — from the fact that the integrationists/segregationist question divides blacks as well as whites. We are told that some black scholars still downgrade Black Studies with secret names like “Advanced Cornbread 202,” while others maintain that only in a black institution can black scholars work with the freedom essential to their scholarship — serious Black Studies elsewhere would be a contradiction in terms. The inevitable result of such ambivalence is that no institutional program in Black Studies is without its local critics, whether for “irrelevance” or for “Tom-ism,” for over- or for under-politicization. (p. 1f)

That quotation can be echoed about Black Church Studies. We do not yet have a body of unemployed black faculty — indeed, we cannot produce faculty fast enough to meet current demands — but in every other sense the picture is the same regarding Black Church Studies. American people do not seem to have much long-term stamina with which they can attempt to solve difficult problems. We tend in this century to run from one new problem to another without ever completing the solution to any. The real danger in theological education today is that we may not have sufficient stamina to reform those aspects of seminary curricula and life which have excluded blacks and their experience for so long. The pressing claims of women and of Latins and other minorities, as well as the pressures of shrinking income and capital, could serve to divert the attention and resources of theological schools before the significant work is done. It is a danger we must keep ever before us simply because, at the minimum, the lives of twenty million Americans are at stake.

Let me close by repeating the conclusion to my Response to Paul Holmer in *Theological Education*:

The consuming task which has been my Holy Grail for over a decade is to open the possibility that there can indeed be “seriousness and (hard) work” in theological education regarding the black religious experience. My reflection upon that decade is that in 1971 (or 1973) we are not substantively further ahead with the business of careful consideration of that issue than we were in 1961. Until the logjam of inertia in both theological education and in the church about this arena of inquiry is broken, we will never know whether the prognostications and predictions of grandeur about black theology are correct or not. (p. 218)

These twelve years in pursuit of an idea have been hard and difficult years. The likelihood is that the next dozen years will be trying ones also, but there are now more hands and minds and hearts at work on the field. I may not be a major participant in the struggle any longer but the task remains. It is the consuming labor of insuring both that the black religious experience will finally have its day in the sun of theological inquiry, and that the black churches of this land will be better and better enabled to lead their people to new freedom and liberation in our time.

