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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*,¹ 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.²

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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¹ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

² See among others, James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1992*, two volumes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); and James Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

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 feminist scholars, such as Carol Christ, have tapped into the rich mine of literature for the study of the spiritual insights of women,³ 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 understanding 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, provided 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

³ *Black Womanist Ethics*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

were the Harlem Renaissance poets.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."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 *Jubilee*) she describes as humanism.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 sees 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

⁴ Charles H. Powell, "Poetry, History and Humanism: An Interview with Margaret Walker," *Black World*, December 1975, pp. 4-17, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ Margaret Walker, *For My People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942); *Jubilee* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966).

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.

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.⁹ 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

⁹ Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Signet Books, 1965).

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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

¹¹ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973).

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."¹² 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

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

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

Black women.¹⁵ 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

¹⁵ Ntozake Shange, *Nappy Edges* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972); *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1975).

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

¹⁶ Shange, *For Colored Girls*, p. 67.

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."¹⁷ 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"¹⁸

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."¹⁹ 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,²⁰ 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

¹⁷ See his, *The Search for Common Ground* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

¹⁸ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. x.

¹⁹ Alice Walker, "Diary of an African Nun" in Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970).

²⁰ Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

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

²¹ Alice Walker, *The Third Life*, pp. 144-145.

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.

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.

²⁴ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1961), p. 17.

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*.²⁵ 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

²⁵ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: New American Library, 1977).

O Solomon don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me.
Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky
Solomon gone home.²⁶

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.²⁷ In *Gather Together in My Name*, written five years after *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*,²⁸ 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).

²⁸ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969).

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."²⁹

Although she has written two or more collections of poetry³⁰ 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.

³⁰ Maya Angelou, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die!* (New York: Random House, 1971); and *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (New York: Random House, 1975).

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.³¹ 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.³² 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.

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).

³² Terry McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale* (New York: Viking Press, 1992).

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.³³ 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.

³³ See, for example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (New York: New American Library, 1987) and the works of Zora Neal Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978) and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1934).