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The Genesis of African American Religious Scholarship

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The Past, Present, and Future of Scholars of Color in the Religious Academy

The Genesis of African American Studies in Black America

The purpose of this paper is to sketch the story of African American religious and theological studies, assess its present state and offer some proposals for the future. Concerning the past, it is important to note that up until the closing decades of the twentieth century, the issue of race in America pertained mainly to the relations between whites and blacks that began with the transatlantic slave trade and endured for two and half centuries. Thus, my thesis in this paper is

that the contemporary state of Black religious and theological studies is seriously diminished by its separation from the wider field of African American studies.

Now, African American religious and theological studies had its deep roots in the wholistic scholarship of one of our most prominent academic ancestors, Carter G. Woodson, who is best known as the father of “Negro history” that is now called “African American history.” I contend that the whole of African American studies was set in motion by his pioneering scholarship and the institutions he built for the purpose of preserving and expand that field.

Woodson was born in West Virginia on December 19, 1875. His parents were former slaves. Ironically, his story is quintessentially American. Though the demands of farm work in a large family prevented him from going to school, his insatiable thirst for knowledge led him to teach himself the basic skills of reading and writing. After spending two years in high school he studied at Berea College in Kentucky and later earned his B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Chicago in 1907 and 1908 respectively. In 1912, he became the second African American to earn a Ph.D. degree from Harvard University with a dissertation entitled *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*.

Deeply moved by the need to correct the false teachings that white scholars had promulgated about African peoples, he sought to use the canons of scholarship to tell the truth about Africans and thus dispel the racist teaching that because Africans were viewed as sub-human they had made no contribution to human civilization. Woodson explained the issue accordingly: “If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile traditions, it becomes a negligible

factor in the thought of the world and it stands in danger of being exterminated.”¹ Thus, the aim of his life-long program was to amass sufficient evidence to disprove all racist claims about African peoples everywhere.

Woodson initiated his work within the racially segregated confines of the black community because the guardians of academic orthodoxy excluded both black scholars and their subject matter from their discourse. Yet Woodson was not deterred by their incivility. Three years after receiving his Ph.D. degree, he became the founder and lifetime executive director of *The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History* in Chicago in 1915. That bold initiative was sparked in part by the release of D. W. Griffith’s highly acclaimed racist film that same year entitled *The Birth of a Nation* which not only disturbed him greatly but all of his learned colleagues with whom he had a life-long working relationship. These included such notable intellectuals as W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, Mary Church Terrell, E. Franklin Frazier, and numerous others.

In 1916, Woodson founded and edited *The Journal of Negro History*, which for the next half century was the premier publication for black studies. Its table of contents reveals a wide range of subject matter inclusive of all dimension of African and African American life. It soon became the chief source for learned studies on Africans on the continent and throughout the diaspora. In fact, Woodson’s own scholarship evidenced a similar breadth as his thirty books and one hundred and fifty essays readily attest. Among those works was his classic study *The Negro Church*.

¹ From Runoko Rashidi’s “History Notes” article, “Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson and the Observance of African History,” <http://www.cwo.com/~lucumi/woodson.html>.

Since white publishing houses rarely if ever published books authored by blacks, Woodson founded the Associated Press as a much needed agency for disseminating black scholarship. Diligent in his endeavors to make scholarship available to the wider public, he pioneered Negro History Week in 1926 to enable schools and churches nation-wide to celebrate black contributions to human civilization. It rapidly became a very successful venture which he attributed to black school teachers. In 1977 the name *Negro History Week* was changed and expanded to *Black History Month*. The month of February was chosen in part because February 12th is Abraham Lincoln's birthday and February 13th is Frederick Douglass' birthday.

As a resource for school teachers, Woodson published the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1937, which soon became a popular guide to the scholarship contained in the *Journal of Negro History*. Few other scholars have been so successful in bridging the wide divide between academic scholars, public schools, churches, and the larger society. Needless to say, perhaps, Woodson was a consummate public intellectual long before the term gained popularity in our day.

Lest anyone think otherwise, it should be noted that Woodson viewed himself as a radical in two respects: *first*, his goal was to overthrow the widespread misunderstandings of African peoples that whites and blacks alike had embraced. Thus, the act of documenting black history was an affront to white racists because it implied what whites had denied namely, black personhood and such concomitant virtues of dignity, freedom, self-reliance, self-respect, and self-determination.

Second, Woodson was in regular contact with many of the major black leaders of his day including Marcus Garvey. In fact, he appreciated Garvey to such an extent that he agreed to write

a regular column in his weekly publication, “The Negro World.” *Third*, Woodson’s purview was holistic and ensured that no dimension of African American life and history would be outside the domain of black scholarly inquiry. *Fourth*, because African American history bestowed dignity and distinctiveness on African peoples it constituted a radical attack on the prevailing racist views of African peoples. Further, Woodson and his colleagues shunned the term “slaves” because it was of its amorphous categorization of their people-hood.

Contrary to the prevailing propaganda of the day, the aim of black history was to demonstrate to children and adults alike that our African ancestry had made notable contributions to America and the world at large. This knowledge instilled racial pride in the minds and spirits of each generation and, hence, inspired them to aspire to similar greatness. In doing so, black history constituted a radical critique of the whole of so-called Anglo-American history. The latter’s exclusion and misinterpretation of the African American presence greatly distorted and falsified American history *per se*. By contrast, then and now African American history has sought to tell the truth about America and its injustice towards African peoples.

That truth invariably compelled them to tell the story of the nation’s birth in infamy because it established and sustained public practices that we today would call crimes against humanity. Most of America’s sacred heroes including the founding fathers participated in that crime. In fact, the constitution failed to settle the issue of the slave trade until 1808 and slavery itself was not abolished until the end of a very bitter Civil War that claimed over eight hundred thousand lives. Further, the struggle for civil rights for African peoples did not achieve its constitutional goal until the middle of the 1960’s. Most of these facts and many more were

analyzed and assessed by African American scholars and preserved by the institutional instrumentalities founded and administered by Carter G. Woodson. Let us not forget that prior to the late 1960's the programs of the various learned societies in America were largely off limits to African Americans.

The Genesis of African American Studies in Predominantly White Universities, Colleges, and Seminaries

Clearly, the months following Dr. King's assassination marked a major turning point in African American cultural history. More intensely than ever before, African Americans began asserting their demands for social, economic, political and cultural changes everywhere and institutions of higher education were no exception.

In 1969 the historian and religious scholar Vincent Harding was one of the founders of the *Institute of the Black World* at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center in Atlanta which evidenced the impact of the civil rights movement on higher education. The Institute was a Pan-African consortium of black scholars, educators, artists, and activists bent on producing black studies programs that would transform all levels of education everywhere including public schools, colleges and universities. It published a quarterly journal called *The Black Scholar* which is now in its 40th year of regular publication. Unfortunately, very few essays by religious scholars have occurred in that journal which evidences a problem I will address more fully below.

It is a curious fact that after originating in an African American context the *Institute of the Black World* and its journal were soon eclipsed by the activities of black students and scholars in

predominantly white institutions of higher learning due in large part to the brain drain from historic black colleges and better financial resources in white institutions with which to woo both black students and faculty into spaces from which they had been excluded previously.

Clearly, 1969 also marked a watershed year in white institutions of higher learning. Hitherto black history was developed and taught in the segregated ghettos of black America and largely concealed from whites. Now, black students demanded an end to that wall of racial exclusion and the mis-education that that separation entailed. Many factors contributed to their mood but foremost among them were the profound changes in their worldviews that these students had experienced during their short life time which included the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and scores of young activists in the civil rights movement.

In the midst of their shock, grief and anger at white America and emboldened by the various protest events of the civil rights movement, African American students began focusing their desires for social change on the institutions where they found themselves. They soon formed Afro-American student associations to oversee, initiate and advocate the fair treatment of black students on campus as well as sustaining their strong, persistent advocacy for the inclusion of the African American studies in the academic curriculum.

Those demands implied the need for African American appointments to the various faculties. At first, most institutions employed such persons as either part-time instructors or as

untenured members of the faculty.² Neither entailed any major institutional commitment. In fact, many of the programs in African American studies begun in those years were short lived because of their insecure marginal status within the institutional structures.

It is important to note that, for the first time in their history, African Americans acted with the full support of the law on their side which was made possible by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voters Rights Act of 1965. Thus, they were determined to actualize their natural impulse for self-respect, pride, and justice everywhere including higher education.

The radical demands of black students were facilitated somewhat by the guilt that many academic administrators felt for their institutional histories of racial segregation and discrimination. Though many sympathized with the demands that black students were making, they hoped to make the necessary correctives cautiously so as not to alienate their alums and boards of governors.

The tragic events of the 1960s also provided the occasion for considerable ideological healing among African Americans and nowhere was that healing more evident than in predominantly white universities and colleges. Hitherto, blacks had been divided both politically and philosophically by the unresolved debate between the integrationist orientation of the civil rights movement and the separatist teaching of the Nation of Islam. Now that the principal spokespersons for both of those viewpoints had been assassinated, their respective ideological

² It is important to note that the author of this essay taught the first such course at the University of Chicago Divinity School. As a Ph.D. student in Ethics and Society, I was appointed as the assistant to the Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program who was designated the official teacher for the course in order to satisfy the legal requirements. I was paid the sum of \$250 for the semester and the students and I met in each other's apartments throughout the semester.

differences seemed to matter less and less. In fact, it did not take much imagination by those on both sides of the debate to affirm the basic values that each was propounding.

In fact, many viewed the debate over racial integration and racial separation as a historical dialectic waiting for a historical synthesis. That synthesis was realized in those nascent African American studies programs where the agency of racial separatism as manifested by Carter G. Woodson had kept alive the African American historical record. Black students in the 1960s drew heavily on that record as their primary evidence for demanding curricular changes in predominantly white institutions of higher education.

Preserving that historical record was one of the great contributions Carter G. Woodson and his circle of learned colleagues had made in founding and preserving *The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History*. Two generations later, their works constituted the initial bibliographies for many of the courses taught in those nascent Afro-American studies programs that were bent on effecting a cultural revolution in all universities and colleges both white and black. An important indicator of this newly discovered ideological synthesis was seen in the names given to the various programs. None of them used the term “Negro” but rather Afro-American or Black studies. The term “African American” did not gain widespread usage until the 1980s.

That revolution in academe necessitated much revisionist work in correcting the distortions in the literature, liberating the subjugated voices of black scholars, and generating new knowledge across the whole spectrum of the humanities. The earliest black studies programs established in 1969 included those at Ohio State University, Cornell University, the University of

California—Berkeley, and the University of California—Los Angeles (later called the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA in honor of its first black valedictorian in 1927).

Strongly resisted in the beginning these black studies programs soon became indicators of a welcoming environment for blacks and their heritage as they entered those predominantly white institutions. The absence of such programs signaled the reverse. Unfortunately, those nascent African American studies programs had accepted uncritically the inheritance of the modern university's exclusion or marginalization of religious studies as a subject for serious academic inquiry. That legacy constitutes a major deficit in need of repair.

Once excluded from the halls of academe on the grounds of a false anthropology, contemporary African American studies programs now enhance the quality of academic teaching, learning and research in all of our institutions of higher learning. In fact, such programs are now viewed as a necessary component in any first-rate American university. Many schools now take great pride in their African American research institutes and centers of inquiry such as: The W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University; the Carter G. Woodson Institute for Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Virginia; The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project at Stanford University; The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University; The Center for African American and African Studies at the University of Michigan; The Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University; and The Center for African American Studies at Princeton University; to mention only a few.

Clearly, African American studies programs have not only expanded the range of teaching and research but they have contributed new methodologies, subject matters, conceptual tools and skills to academe that consistently unite the learners and their scholarly research. That is to say, research is not viewed as an activity abstracted from lived experience but, rather, both teachers and researchers are imbued with the spirit of responsibility towards their community of belonging. In short, the search for social justice is never far removed from their academic inquiries.

Thus, it is not surprising to discover that the motto of the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University is “Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility.” That motto typifies the mission of African Studies programs everywhere. Nor is it surprising that such contemporary African American scholars like Cornel West, Stephen Carter, Michael Eric Dyson, Henry Louis Gates, Imani Perry, Melissa Harris-Lacewell, and others are among the nation’s most prominent public intellectuals. Each is deeply engaged in African American studies as were their predecessors, W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Benjamin Mays, Anna J. Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Ida B. Wells, Martin Luther King, Jr. and many more as well as numerous playwrights, poets, novelists, musicians, and other artists. All of these and many more are examples of public intellectuals whose academic projects have aimed at the generation of new knowledge and practices as means for combating structural racism everywhere.

Clearly, the struggle for racial justice in America and elsewhere has always been a moral struggle because its goal has been that of protecting and enhancing the quality of human life for

all. In fact, the moral quality of this nation's public life has been steadily enriched by that struggle. One of the major contributions African American scholars have made to academe is their persistent striving to press their various disciplines of study and research into the service of analyzing the issues of racial injustice and prescribing directives for racial justice. This continues to be a difficult struggle not only because of racism's insidious resiliency but, also, because of the academy's discomfort with mixing the purpose of academic scholarship with that of public advocacy. Thus, in that respect, African American studies represent the on-going challenge to help the academy overcome the theory-practice divide that has characterized academic learning in western institutions since the dawn of the enlightenment.

Another dimension of African American Studies programs is their common interdisciplinary character which enables them to transcend the narrow confines of departmentalism by establishing dialogical relationships among such disciplines as history, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, psychology, linguistics, literature, art, music, philosophy, religion, and others.

The Role of Religious and Theological Studies

One cannot overly emphasize the claim that any genuine discussion of social reality among African Americans must include adequate attention to religion because it constitutes the institutional locus for all social and moral value in the black community. In fact, the first black independence movement in this country comprised the formation of independent black churches round the time of the Revolutionary War. In other words, when the Constitutional Convention

met in Philadelphia in 1787 to establish its independence from British colonial rule, six blocks away, the black church independence movement was being formed as The Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church separated itself from the immorality of slave-holding Christianity. That act constituted the first black independence movement in the world.

Now, the common liturgical practices of white and black churches can be easily misunderstood for sameness in all respects. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Their discernible differences in music, song, and rhythm, the cadence of the preacher, the form and content of the prayers, the testimonies, and the responsive spirit of the congregation disclose an alternative spirituality deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of black people.

In fact, as blacks searched for adequate indigenous vehicles for expressing their spiritual strivings, they modified the liturgical, musical, and homiletical inheritances they had received from whites. Those newly devised forms of worship expressed the way the people understood their relation to the sacred and functioned as reliable indicators of their societal condition as well as their struggle for freedom. Further, their work in building religious institutions evidenced their embrace of power as a moral force when pressed into the service of social justice. Further still, their worship services enabled the people to invoke the power of the sacred as an ally in their opposition to oppression and the source of their hope for deliverance.

Those black scholars who chose to study the black churches prior to the 1960's were grounded in methodological assumptions and procedures that had been learned in white graduate schools of sociology, anthropology and history. Many of them assumed that the teaching of the white churches was normative and that the black churches were either on a lower level or mere

facsimiles of the former. The vast majority of such studies viewed the black churches as helping their people adapt to their subordinate social status. Few if any viewed them as playing any type of protest role. Thus the civil rights movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. took the nation by surprise because few could have predicted that the black churches would be the impetus for such profound social change. To a certain extent the black churches even surprised themselves.

In fact, C. Eric Lincoln dated the end of the so-called “negro church” and the birth of the “black church” with the Montgomery Bus Boycott which, for the first time witnessed the black churches confronting the white power structure directly and eventually winning a decisive battle.³

That revisionist style of scholarship was rooted in various strands of black nationalism which affirmed a separate, autonomous tradition of black resistance to racism that was often more implicit than explicit. Most important, black scholars introduced that tradition of resistance to the academy and sought to secure its future therein. Some of its principle features have been expressions of racial pride, solidarity, self-initiation, self-determination, and resistance to all forms of racial injustice.

The year 1969 also witnessed the publication of James H. Cone’s first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, in which he issued a broadside attack on the theology of the white churches. Further and most shockingly, he proclaimed that the nascent odious term black power was “Christ’s central message to twentieth century America.”⁴ While former black scholars had

³ See C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).

⁴ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969), 1.

always viewed white America and its Christianity as both hypocritical and heretical, and while the historian of religion Charles H. Long had viewed America as a hermeneutical problem, Cone went farther and condemned both the nation and white Christianity as the anti-Christ. In fact, the greatest affront to white Christianity was Cone's claim that God is black, an argument that brought much resistance from both whites and blacks that forced him to defend himself against the charge of reverse racism.

It is interesting to note that while Cone was located in one of America's most prestigious predominantly white seminaries, his principal theological opponent was J. Deotis Roberts who was located in black America's preeminent Howard University. For the next two decades these two figures carried an ongoing theological debate.

In 1970, the Society for the Study of Black Religion was organized not in opposition to the AAR but as an academic forum for the development of scholarship relative to the black theological perspective and its implications for the various disciplines in theological studies. From the beginning that society was viewed as a half-way house between the isolation of black scholars in their various institutions and the AAR, the custodian of the academic merit system.

By the 1980s, African American women theologians (Jacqueline Grant, Delores Williams, and Katie Cannon) critically discerned their invisibility in both the black theological and feminist projects and rapidly moved forward by inaugurating their own theology under the label "womanist theology." They were embraced by James Cone and the Society for the Study of Black Religion where a healthy discourse has been in place ever since.

Now, in my judgment, departments of religious studies tend to be more adept than theological seminaries in interacting with their peers in African American Studies programs. The reason for this is partly due to the fear that African American studies programs have about religious studies and the fear that Theological Studies have of the so-called secular world of academe. These fears are rooted more in prejudices than truth and need to be overcome for the sake of our ongoing mutual struggles; the sooner the better. In my judgment, it is necessary that theological scholars engage these academic colleagues by taking the initiative to organize some dialogical events through panel discussions, lectures, and conferences. The AAR could be a locus for initiating such events.

At Princeton Theological Seminary, we have tried to encourage our African American students to take courses in the African American Studies program at Princeton University. Unfortunately, few have taken advantage of that opportunity because such studies are thought not to fit well into the culture of the black churches where they feel called to serve. In short, we have discovered that a great divide exists between the culture of most black churches on the one hand, and black theology, womanist theology, and programs of African American studies on the other hand. While this has some of the marks of the traditional town-gown divide, I believe there is more than that is at stake and merits careful inquiry.

Since religion has been an integral part of all African American communities, African American Studies programs should not ignore or neglect that reality. Yet, they do nonetheless. The claim that all such programs should interact with black scholars in departments of religion, divinity schools and seminaries is a good one but very difficult to implement. Further, black

theological scholars in seminaries and those in departments of African American studies should make every effort to interact with one another and encourage their students do likewise. Such interaction might take the form of joint teaching, collaborative research, or guest lecturers to mention a few. The purpose of all such interaction should be that of exchanging ideas, theories, methodologies, skills, and practices that can be mutually beneficial. Though some of this occurs at the AAR, much more sustained interaction is needed in order to discuss and assess new ideas, research prospects, critical issues, and possible collaborative ventures. I think that those in theological and religious studies should take the initiative in fostering better relationships.

Two of the concerns that require inquiry and discussion are the following: first, the methodological conflict between normative and analytical studies; second, the ideological debates in theological, ethical, and public policy matters between so-called conservative and liberal approaches that attend virtually all scholarship.

Further, in order to overcome the parochialism implicit in African American studies, its future must engage the broader sphere of African and diasporic studies. Similarly, African American religious and theological studies must expand their purview in order to overcome the inertia that has settled into that field of inquiry. The discovery of new ideas and approaches necessitate a more expansive discourse than what is presently available. Further, more meaningful study and collaborative research is needed with other ethnic minority groups in this country and elsewhere for the sake of mutual enrichment and empowerment.

Finally, our academic ancestors in the early years of the twentieth century were much more effective than we are in disseminating their scholarship to religious institutions, schools,

and the broader community. Such a program enabled ordinary people to benefit from the findings of black scholarship and for black scholars to get feedback from the larger community.

Unfortunately, such dialogical relationships barely exist in our day which often gives the impression that black scholars and their work live in an ivory tower.