

Redemptive Difference: What Can a Black Woman Teach Me?

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AS A SEMINARY PROFESSOR, but one who is not a preacher, I am occasionally confronted by someone at church asking me, “Why are you wasting your time working at that cemetery?” This question stems not from an anti-intellectualism (stereotypically ascribed to the black church), but rather from a very reasonable hermeneutic of suspicion that: 1) questions whether the study of religion should ultimately lead to the weakening or demise of one’s faith; and 2) resists the notion that something as sacred as one’s faith should be exposed and subjected to the debasement and devaluation of all things black, which they perceive to be characteristic of predominantly white institutions. In my academic context, when I enter the classroom as a professor of Christian ethics and black church studies, the first thing that many students engage is neither my mind nor my subject matter, but rather the fact that I am a black woman. My very embodiment creates dissonance for many students who (as I’ve been told) immediately ask themselves, “What can a black woman teach me?” (Floyd-Thomas, 2002).

Further, as a black Christian, and a woman, in the academy, I function within a professional realm that is inclined to view my “racialized-engendered religiosity” as a three-fold impediment to my ability to engage fully in the “objective, critical” study of religion. I am either a little too much this or a little too much that; a kind of academic purgatory that serves to preclude me from being considered entirely legitimate. If we apply this to the faculty taxonomy that prevails in most predominantly white schools, I would be regarded as too Christian whereas the seminary/divinity schools would likely regard my Christian orientation as too black, and on both fronts too womanish.

Therefore, as a black scholar and black Christian, I function somewhere on the margins of two institutions, each of which exerts pressure on me to compartmentalize

my life as a Christian from my life as a scholar, and each views my dual allegiance with suspicion. This is the reality for many of us who identify as racial-ethnic minority scholars who both study and practice our religion or faith. How do we process and respond to being treated as doppelgangers for “real scholars” in the academy and/or as “sell-outs” as people of faith in our religious communities? Such is the conundrum and curse of the *tertium quid*, described by W.E.B. DuBois (1903) as one

straightly foreordained to walk within the Veil. To be sure, behind the thought lurks the afterthought, — some of them with favoring chance might become [human], but in sheer self-defense we dare not let them, and we build about them walls so high, and hang between them and the light a veil so thick, that they shall not even think of breaking through.

This crisis is the inevitable extension of the relationship between my personal convictions as a black Christian and my vocational goals as a scholar-teacher. However, this life is not mine alone, but it is the life of many religious racial-ethnic minoritized (RREM) scholars who are wedded to religious praxis and religious scholarship. It is this indeterminate, insider-outsider existence that enables us to mine the resources and cultivate the wisdom necessary to navigate these two worlds, and even transform them.

Many black scholars enter the ranks of the academy holding fast to the value of religion, along with the promise of education, thinking that the academy presents an ideal and viable context within which to teach religion so as to redeem the legacy of black religion. Disillusionment, however, comes fast and furious in the face of what Bible scholar Fernando Segovia calls the “alien” and “alienating” academic culture of deception that permeates theological education and religion scholarship. Many RREM scholars who experience the deception and alienation are torn between the hope of their religion and the promise of their education. Some scholars, such as Renita Weems (2005), are very careful and intentional in naming and identifying the hermeneutical dilemma:

As a Hebrew Bible scholar and preacher, I reside in two homes — the academy and the church. These two are jealous, demanding lovers that insist upon my undivided attention and unswerving loyalty. They unrelentingly ask, “Which one will you be — a preacher or a scholar?”

This struggle is representative of the dynamic tension between modernism and postmodernism. In modernity there have been two things that have been objectified and against which the modern intellectual tradition has constructed itself: dark people and religion. This negative objectification has served as the quintessential “other” against which white Western intellectual identity has been constructed.

Modernity has been imbued with a Calvinistic orthodoxy that accepts the predestination of social stratification that separates a chosen elite from the disinherited masses. Conversely, postmodern rhetoric

advocates a civic humanism that purports the primacy of reason over faith, professing a secular vision of equality for the previously disinherited. Modernist institutions have adopted postmodern agendas as their *modi operandi*, in order to advance into the next millennia (Giddens 1991).

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Although couched in postmodern rhetoric, colleges, universities, and even seminaries hold unwaveringly to modernistic objectives, having undergone only a superficial transformation to combat the liberating potential that religion holds for marginalized people. The educational institution as a “learning machine” is the most instrumental means of doing this legerdemain, in that it is more concerned with designating social roles than dealing with human personhood (Foucault 1995). Thus, the self-reflection required for autonomy and agency is prohibited for minoritized groups. Consequently, their professional options are not self-determined, but rather imposed. Simply put, rarely do institutions grant the freedom and autonomy to their one and only professor of Asian studies, black church studies, Islamic studies, Jewish studies, Latino/a church studies, or Native-American studies to apply her/his expertise to design her/his positions or racial-ethnic programs. Therefore, RREM scholars find themselves in a double-bind: They are often precluded from lending their expertise toward shaping core courses that have become normative fields within a Eurocentric model while simultaneously their efforts to design programs for which they are the only experts in the institution are stymied, constrained, and resisted by the status quo.

Therefore, RREM scholars have found it necessary to construct a minoritized religious humanity outside the realm of the modern/postmodern categories of race and religion. The goal here is not to erase racial-ethnic or religious identities, but rather to act with the same authority on behalf of our religions and religious communities as have white religious scholars such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As RREMs, we ought to be able to expect to do the same for the broad spectrum of our religious traditions.

Toward this end, *What constitutes the faithful pursuit of our profession as RREMs?*

To quote Martin Jaffee, a scholar-practitioner of Judaism:

Religion is an intense and sustained cultivation of a style of life that heightens awareness of the morally binding connections between the self, the human community and the most essential structures of reality. Religions posit various orders of reality and help individuals and groups to negotiate their relations with these orders. . . . Religion is a method for connecting . . . worlds.

For religious scholars who are situated socially at the margins of both our faith communities and Eurocentric academies, our vocational task is not merely to reside on the margins and manage our two connecting worlds but rather to use the epistemological insight of being a *tertium quid* to change those worlds (Freire 1981). This entails undergoing a risky process of maturation and fortitude, a rite of passage marking not only a coming of age within our communities but also a coming to grips with their perversions — racism, ethnocentrism, misogyny, elitism, and xenophobia. To assist with this arduous labor as sustenance for the journey, I offer the following four womanist tenets as critical insights for RREM scholars:

- A) **Claim radical subjectivity.** RREM scholars must unapologetically claim our insider/outsider vantage point, utilizing it as the point from which to teach and speak on behalf of our communities. Our pedagogical imperative is to allow our presence to serve as a reminder of the need for change and growth while simultaneously facilitating and enabling it.
- B) **Cultivate traditional communalism.** Develop the ability to bridge both the academy and religious community in such a way as to use the practical wisdom of each to evaluate the qualities of the other. Of fundamental importance is to dispel the myths of “collegiality” and “political correctness,” that are routinely adduced to maintain a veneer of civility, but in actuality serve more to undermine the formation of authentic, effective community (Copeland 1999).
- C) **Practice redemptive self-love.** Redemptive self-love is the assertion of our humanity and authority as RREM scholars in contradistinction to white solipsism and religious anti-intellectualism. It is the practice of self-care in the midst of excessive scrutiny wherein we must protect ourselves from internalizing images of ourselves that suggest we are inferior, incompetent, heretical, or sacrilegious.
- D) **Seek critical engagement.** Critical engagement is the unequivocal belief that we are agents of change who play a profound role not only in the liberation of our religious communities, but also in the true enlightenment of the academic study of them. A holistic and integrated sensibility can transcend the imposed stigma of being *tertium quid* by seizing the freedom to be ourselves.

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color teaching at similar institutions. In fact, I have found that many liberals would be incredulous when their own complicity in racist structures is questioned. After all, “they” marched with Martin Luther King, which in their minds gave them nonracist credentials for life. As long as I riled against the Religious Right, everyone was happy. But when I began to explore how liberal religious and academic thought is as damaging to scholars of color as it was when done by conservatives, then I discovered that my scholarship became suspect.

I have had students in class voice their concern, to my presence, that a person with my views should not be working at such a liberal institution. I had one student who, after taking a class on liberationist thought with me, claimed in class that my work lacked a cutting edge. Another questioned my pedagogy when I quoted an inflammatory statement made by Fanon, expecting the class to go to the library and find out what he was talking about. I even had a student walk out of class, claiming she’d had enough, during a difficult discussion on how white-skin privilege creates an inactive false hope.

The issue, as I see it, is not whether I know my material, or am cutting edge, or am effective in my classroom pedagogy, or lack

the skill to effectively discuss white privilege. The issue is something else. You just know that if I were a Euro-American professor, none of these students, even if they were upset, would have offered such a public and direct rebuke. They were able to voice such a challenge because in their eyes, I am perceived as powerless to negatively affect their graduate (specifically doctoral) work. Consequently, it is safe for them to exercise their white power and privilege when a man of color questions their constructed reality, which, like their more conservative classmates at other institutions, is still based on white supremacy and privilege.

My intelligence is also challenged by students (as well as by some faculty and administrators) when I allow the spirituality of marginalized communities to inform and impact my scholarship. I am a man of faith whose first act when coming to the office is to light a candle to my Virgencita del Cobre, who enjoys visiting Pentecostal storefront Latino/a churches where I can “dance” in the Spirit and maybe — if truth be told — even speak in tongues. It is crucial for my scholarship to be rooted in the experience of my people so that I can effectively function as an organic intellectual. Only then do I find the work I do as an ethicist relevant. My Euro-American colleagues who rely more on the so-called European Enlightenment Project usually


view the spirituality of scholars of color as proof that they lack academic rigor. The quest for “academic excellence” becomes code-language for fluency in Eurocentric meta-narratives.

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Perspectives arising from marginalized communities might be interesting, but they always fall short of “academic excellence.” Books and papers written from these perspectives are usually seen as lacking depth, or too “churchy” for academia. Failure to operate from the Eurocentric canon, or the insistence of participating in the spiritual practices of one’s community of color, is viewed with suspicion by many liberals. Yet, for many communities of color, the spiritual is as crucial as the intellectual, and for those scholars of color grounded in these communities, the false dichotomy created between the academic and the spiritual prevents us from fully exploring all the dimensions of our community. And if truth be told, it erodes the academic excellence

that is trying to be maintained.

To be Other within the academy means that the scholar of color must publish three times as much as a white colleague just to receive half the recognition, struggling to prove they are worthy of being in their particular institution. This is not because students, colleagues, or administrators are necessarily racists (although some obviously are). It is because the power structures within the academy are racist for them. While no graduate student of color who lacks proficiency in Eurocentric thought can ever obtain a doctorate, let alone employment, Euro-American graduate students can obtain a PhD and never have to read or know the literature developing within marginalized scholarly communities. Or as one recent candidate for a Bible opening responded to a question I asked, “No books written by blacks or Hispanics about the Bible exist to the best of my knowledge.”

As long as our scholarship remains on the margins, as long as our scholarship continues to be seen as irrelevant, lacking in academic excellence, or merely the “forced” diversity quota tacked onto the cannon, as long as we are easily dismissed as angry or simply hating white people, we will continue to be the Other. 

FLOYD-THOMAS, from p.iii

To give expression to these four womanist principles, one will have to embody what social critic bell hooks (1994) describes as engaged pedagogy. She claims:

That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that there is an aspect of our work is that not merely to share information but to share the intellectual and spiritual growth of our [communities]. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our [communities] is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.

We are called, therefore, to knowledge production that does not detract from our religious heritage, racial-ethnic identity, or academic training, but to lend the expertise of each to infuse the other so as to make these worlds livable and lovable again. The RREM scholar’s demonstration of merging previously antagonistic realms actually offers a demonstration of a more inclusive, imaginative, and intimate production of knowledge about the sacred.

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ESPINOSA, from p.iv

Carrasco calls “center/periphery dynamics.” Unlike early cultural anthropologist Manuel Gamio’s negative view of Mexican Indian influences on Catholicism, Carrasco celebrated the cultural and religious hybridity of the Mexican-American religious experience.

Toward a Working Definition of Chicano Religions

At the 1996 *New Directions in Chicano Religions Conference*, Charles Long challenged the participants to define what they meant by Mexican-American/Chicano religions and to then explain how it differed from any other religious phenomena. I argue that the Mexican-American cultural blending, reimagination, rearticulation, and poetic reconstruction and aesthetic practice of “Mexican” and “American” religious rituals, customs, traditions, practices, beliefs, and symbols in the United States gives them a Mexican-American or “Chicano” inflection that sometimes differentiates them in application and form, though not necessarily in function, from Anglo-American religious practices. Mexican-American religious practices and traditions both resonate with their Mexican counterparts while at the same time exhibiting a blending, a combining, a fusing, or a mixing with Anglo-American practices and traditions to create a new combinative hybrid reality that is neither entirely Mexican nor entirely American but is in fact Mexican-American or Chicano. This blending is illustrated in religious traditions like the Catholic Cursillo and in the East L.A.-birthed Victory Outreach Pentecostal movement.

Ethno-Phenomenological Approach to Religion

One approach to interpreting Mexican-American religions is an ethno-phenomenological methodology that seeks to bridge the open hostility between religious studies and theology. Such a method listens to and draws upon the important discoveries and insights from religious studies, theological studies, and the above-noted disciplines and influences. Scholars using this approach seek to analyze the world of their subjects on their own plane of reference through a methodology that respects and holds in balance both the perspective of the skeptical, irreligious, and noncommitted secular outsider and the devout and committed religious insider. An ethno-phenomenological approach offers a scholarly framework that engages in what Ninian Smart has called “bracketed realism,” whereby the scholars’ own religious beliefs (or lack thereof) and ideological political positions are bracketed or suspended and not superimposed or projected on to their subjects. While personal subjectivities and values are unavoidable, a scholar should nonetheless try to describe and analyze the religious phenomena in such a way that is not only critical but also recognizable to the practitioner. The ethno-phenomenological approach desires to generate new scholarship that examines the way ordinary people find hope and interpret their very real and imaginary universes. Perhaps by so doing, we can transform the Mexican-American religious experience as the Other Within into a robust and rigorous academic field of mainstream scholarly inquiry. 