Rosemary Skinner Keller and
Rosemary Radford Ruether, editors

In Our Own Voices

FOUR CENTURIES OF AMERICAN WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS WRITING

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We dedicate this book to our mothers and grandmothers,
Rose Zeckman Braude,
Vicci Sperry,
Clarita Martinez Talamantez,
Ruth Lucille Parr Hardesty,
Helen Monroe Longworthy,
Mary Morley,
Rebecca Cresap Ord Radford,
Mary Doris McLean Townes,
and Ruthe Carlson.

If not first pregnancy:

Having reached _____ weeks, this fetus would have been my (number) child. I grieve its passing out of the protection of my body.

"You know when the wild goats of the rock give birth, You mark when the hinds calve" (on Job 39:1).

You created the miracle of birth and the wonder of the body that cares for mother and child.

Dayyan Ha-Emet, Righteous Judge, You care for Your creatures even when such care tastes bitter.

Who are we to understand Your ways, to know what future would have lain ahead for myself and my child had it come to term?

"But her flesh upon her shall have pain and her soul within her shall mourn" (adapted from Job 14:22).

Ha-Rahaman, O Merciful One, heal my body and my soul; heal my womb so that I may carry to term a healthy soul, that I may come to sing Your praises as a happy mother surrounded by her children in the courtyards of a Jerusalem at peace.

Recite Birkat ha-gomel:

Blessed are You, Almighty God, Sovereign of the Universe, Who bestows kindness on the undeserving, and has shown me every kindness.

Congregation responds:

May the One who has shown you every kindness, ever show kindness to you, sela. Amen.

CHAPTER FOUR

Black Women
From Slavery to Womanist Liberation

Emilie M. Townes

Documents

THE COLONIAL ERA

1. Phillis Wheatley: Colonial Evangelical Piety

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

2. Amanda Berry Smith: Conversion Through Wrestling with the Devil
3. Sojourner Truth: The Conversion of a Female Slave
4. Ida B. Wells-Barnett: Living in the New Jerusalem
5. Anna Julia Cooper: Women and the Regeneration and Progress of the Race

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

6. Mary McLeod Bethune: Leaving a Legacy
7. Sara Duncan: Vital Questions
8. Church of God in Christ: 1941 Annual Convocation Minutes
9. National Black Sisters' Conference: Statement of Purpose
10. Nannie Helen Burroughs: "The Slabtown District Convention"
11. Zora Neale Hurston: "The Wounds of Jesus"

MOVING INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

12. Toni Morrison: Loving the Heart
13. Katie Geneva Cannon: Black Women's Stories and Moral Wisdom
14. Delores S. Williams: Speaking Black Women's Tongue?
15. Jacquelyn Grant: The Bible and Jesus in Womanist Tradition
16. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes: Afrocentric Appropriation of the Bible

IN 1619, when Africans first arrived on the shores that would become the United States, they came with a religious world far different from that of their white masters and mistresses.[1] Until the next century, however, Africans brought to the New World had little or no contact with Christianity. A few Blacks did convert to Christianity, but their conversions had little positive effect on white attitudes toward Africans. Like Black men, Black women were excluded from worship by their white masters and mistresses. Virginia's laws made a distinction between servants from Europe who were called Christians and servants from Africa who were Negro servants. Colonists did not seek to convert Negro servants, and sometimes legislation forbade attending church and discouraged conversions. However, in his memoirs, John Winthrop noted that a Black woman was baptized and communed into the Puritan congregation in 1641. This, he notes, was only after she proved her faithful commitment to God over many years. In 1662 the Virginia legislature decreed that children inherited their mother's social status, not her religious station. The witchcraft hysteria that swept through the colonies from 1647 to 1692 touched the lives of Blacks. A Black woman servant, Marja, was among the first to fall victim to the frenzy of the colonists.

In 1701 the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in the Foreign Parts began to Christianize slaves. Even so, slaves did not convert to Christianity in any significant or recorded numbers until the 1740s, during the First Great Awakening. However, slaves in the South and free Blacks in the North were not without a religious life. The constant influx of Black Africans through the slave trade meant a continual renewal and revitalization of the traditions and religions of Africa in the Americas.[2] Slaves maintained links with their African heritage through oral history, drumming at funerals and dances, preserving the art of wood carving, and making reed baskets and mats.

The cosmology of the slaves during the 1600s and 1700s was a universe crafted from a blend of West African religions with Christianity. White missionaries and ministers prohibited religious dancing and shouting, but the slaves did so in their religious life beyond the watchful eye of white religious authorities.[3] When left alone, slave worship contained the West African notion of the forces of the universe, both evil and good. Both were at hand and available for consultation and for protection.[4] Also present was the Christian God who would send a man to set the

slaves free as Moses had confronted Pharaoh to set the Hebrew slaves free. This was a God who was not wholly transcendent but immanent as well.

In this period, Black women converted to Christianity in greater numbers than Black men. One of the first free Black women to present her child for baptism in 1683, Ginney Bess, was among the number of women who joined churches. Their hope, in part, was to provide an asylum from the harshness of slavery in the South and white prejudice in the North. However, the evangelical fervor many of these women found in the First Great Awakening should not be overlooked. The writings of Phillis Wheatley near the close of the eighteenth century reflect this deep religious enthusiasm (document 1). Writing from a Northern context in Boston, Wheatley did not question her servitude. Rather, she sought personal moral rectitude and salvation. Her concern for "true felicity" extended to others as well.

The evangelical religion of the Second Awakening in the early decades of the nineteenth century provided a refuge for people who relied on their subjective knowledge of God (experiential and emotional) rather than on objective knowledge (reason and logic). The Second Awakening was more secular and more optimistic than the first. It popularized religion while at the same time being larger than merely a manifestation of religion. This new evangelical fervor came at a crucial time in the social life of the country. The United States was emerging from a period of anticlericalism and into one of social and cultural disintegration.

Religion, evangelical and indigenous, helped to instill and strengthen a sense of identity among marginal groups in American society. Among Blacks, the folk beliefs and fetishes that had developed in the African American religious worldview blended with the evangelical enthusiasm that the revivalist movement brought to the early nineteenth century. Evangelical religion was felt personally and bodily, and this was particularly true for African Americans.[5] Although by 1790 the number of slaves raised within a fully developed African culture made up only a small percentage of the total slave population, Black slaves who were religious had a legacy of an African cosmology, which stressed body and spirit, that ordered their religious and social worlds.[6] Yet more slaves were employing Jewish and Christian symbols to formulate their conceptions of their origin and destiny.[7]

The burst of revivalism in the early nineteenth century helped African Americans and whites alike to gain reference points in a society that was undergoing drastic changes through immigration, the closing of the slave trade, and growing technology. On some levels, Black churches embraced a theology of liberation, self-determination, and African American autonomy.[8] Slaves who gathered to worship could not reflect a concrete millennial impulse openly.[9] With whites keeping a watchful eye on slave religious gatherings, slaves were forced to be careful in their eschatological impetus. The untrained or ignorant eye and ear could not catch the this-worldly implications of spirituals drawn from the Bible, Protestant hymns, sermons, and African styles of singing and dancing.[10]

African American evangelicalism was a communal celebration, not an "isolating experience of awakening to a deep sense of guilt and sinfulness." This was contrary to white evangelicalism, which stressed a polarization between individualism and communitarianism. Also, white evangelicalism had a need to create powerful symbols of sinful worldliness. Whites felt a need to find signs of redemption in abstinence, bodily inhibition, and withdrawal from the world. Such needs were not shared by slaves, who lived in a world of sacred meaning and collective redemption.[11]

Salvation was the central focus for Black evangelicalism. Human repentance and faith were not sufficient to guarantee salvation (document 2). Slaves prayed to be released from sin in the midst of a physical bondage that could be objectified and cast outside their souls in a way that was unavailable to their white masters.[12] The historian Donald Mathews notes that "the emotional toll of slavery was much more effective than the doctrine of original sin in creating self-contempt."[13]

From evangelicalism, Blacks inherited a belief system that valued a disciplined person who lived within a disciplined community. African Americans believed that by submitting to such discipline they could demand that whites deal with them according to standards that transcended the master-slave relationship.[14]

Protest and accommodation were the two poles open to slaves in their religious as well as secular lives. Evangelical Christianity supported both, at times enabling slaves to choose protest and at other times calling slaves to accept their fate.[15] The protest tradition of the Black Church faded as the nineteenth century wore on. The militancy represented by

African Americans such as David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet diminished as the independent Black evangelical churches began to institutionalize and take on many characteristics of their white evangelical counterparts.[16]

The primary responses of the late-nineteenth-century African American woman to her struggle with the narrow space and dark enclosure of racial and economic subordination were expressed through her commitments to religious and social organizations. African American women of this era espoused a profound spirituality forged from the twin hearths of African cosmology and evangelical piety. This spirituality was distinct from white evangelical Christianity in form and practice. However, both Black and white spiritualities provided the framework for women's participation in social and moral reform in the public realm.

African American and white women's religious expression and their spirituality were intensely personal matters. Yet they took their concern for their moral development, expanded it to their families, and ultimately presented their concerns to the larger society through associational work and moral reform societies as well as preaching and exhorting (document 2).

Black women who were active in the church had a deep, personal relationship with God and Jesus. This was not unlike the experience of Black men who were active in the church. Jesus was not only Lord and Savior; he was brother and friend. Through this personal relationship with Jesus, Black women could transcend the inhuman structures that surrounded them in the slave South and repressive North.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, religious worship and spirituality were expressed in groups, as people gathered to worship in a blending of African survivalisms and white evangelical Christianity. One's spiritual life was shared through conversion, baptism, and communion. Increasingly, the joy and release of the ring shout, the spontaneity of spirituals, and the appeal to the interrelatedness of humans with nature were lost. African American Christians began a personal journey in their faith.

African American women, however, took an intriguing avenue in expressing their spirituality. Black women in religious circles did not depict themselves as the larger society portrayed white women—fragile and impressionable with little capacity for rational thought.[17] Black

women viewed themselves as having a capacity to influence men and consistently described their power of persuasion over men as historically positive. African American women's biblical hermeneutics reveal women in dual image, just as men were portrayed, and they affirmed their likeness to men and their oneness with men in a joint quest for salvation.[18]

Black women took pride in the mothers of the Bible, who became their role models for motherhood. The mothers of Isaac, Moses, Samson, and others gave Black women a view of women as more than bodily receptacles through which great men were born. They saw these mothers as responsible for raising sons who would deliver Israel from its oppressors.[19] They drew the obvious parallels for their lives and the lives of Black people in the nineteenth century.

African American women did not break from the orthodoxy of the Black Church but restated that orthodoxy in what historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham characterizes as a "progressive and liberating language for women."[20] Black women took the roles of wife, sister, daughter, and mother; combined them with a personal spiritual experience of God in Christ; and understood themselves to be ministers in their homes. With that step, Black women moved on from their image of domestic comforter to a greater call. This was possible through their intense evangelical spiritual drive to live a higher and better life and their concern to shape families and a society that reflected Christian morals and precepts. Black women took the biblical images of Phoebe, Priscilla, and Mary as co-workers with Paul and translated them into their own work. Their stress was an ultimate allegiance to God and not to men.[21] This drive toward Christian moral perfection by Black women did not readily translate into ordination. Jarena Lee traveled well over two thousand miles and delivered 178 sermons to spread the gospel, yet she was never ordained (see document 10 of chapter 7).[22]

Black women's religious experience in the nineteenth century combined the idealization of the home and motherhood with the attack of the secular woman's movement against sexually exclusive spheres. Brooks notes that the dual image of Christ as "feminine and masculine, passive and aggressive, meek and conquering," emerged to inform "their self-perceptions and self-motivations." Brooks observes that these women shifted back and forth from feminine to masculine imagery as

they described their role in the evangelical crusade of the period: they described themselves both as homemakers and as soldiers.[23]

African American women, like white women, could not remain within their homes and see themselves as fully answering God's call to repentance and salvation. Women's associational activities were in direct response to the Great Awakening, in which Protestants tried to counteract the influence of Catholicism and the religious indifference and rationalism of the day to create an enduring and moral social order.[24]

Black and white women developed a spirituality that took them outside their daily prayer and reflection time and into the world. Their public work was deeply wedded to their inner and intense reflection. The goal was salvation on earth. Because of their unique role in shaping the moral fiber of society through the family, women took up the challenge to spread the promise of salvation. Religion provided a way to order one's life and priorities. It also enabled women to rely on an authority beyond the world of men (document 5).[25]

African American and white women formed maternal societies in response to the cultural and religious elevation of the role of motherhood. Their members gathered to prepare themselves to guide children properly and to raise a generation of Christians. Moral reform societies were begun to eliminate the sin of licentiousness that appeared in the lust of men and the prostitution of women. These societies sought to reform and resurrect fallen women and to publicize and ostracize men who visited prostitutes. The focus of moral reform societies was on the family as an arena for solving larger social problems. The women of these societies often portrayed females as sacrificial victims to male lust, and they decried prostitution in language evoking women's power to avenge.[26]

African American women began with an intense personal experience of the divine in their lives and took that call to salvation into the public realm to reform a corrupt moral order. Their spirituality, which at first viewing resembles a self-centered piety with little relation to the larger context, exemplifies the linking of personal and social transformation to effect salvation. These women sought perfection and advocated social reform in the framework of a spirituality that valued life and took seriously the responsibility to help create and maintain a just and moral social order. These women of the nineteenth century lived their spirituality (document 4). They accepted the traditional roles handed to them yet began to shape and bend them through their understandings of their ultimate relationship to God.

The brutal reality of Jim Crow laws that legalized segregation in the United States placed a heavy burden on African Americans. This separate but equal decree of 1896 ushered in what W. E. B. DuBois called the problem of the twentieth century—the color line. Black men and women found the indignities of slavery replaced with the perniciousness of racism. For Black Christians, 95 percent of whom lived in the South, legalized segregation and unchecked racism became the fodder for their witness against injustice. Most of these Black Christians were women who understood that their Christian duty called them to oppose Jim Crow with every moral fiber of their being.

In the secular arena, Black churchwomen turned to the club movement to alleviate Black suffering and agitate for social equality. Black club women, like their white sisters, placed a great emphasis on the sanctity of the home and the woman's place in it. There was little direct contradiction of the church's doctrine that females were essentially domestic beings. Both within and outside the club movement, motherhood enjoyed the greatest sanctity. Black women saw Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the personification of the highest expression of womanhood.[27] Although motherhood was dominant, these women also referred to their roles as wives, sisters, and daughters. Men's conversions and the minister's moral rectitude were attributed to "a mother's influence, a sister's guidance, or to the tender persuasion of a devoted wife or daughter."[28]

Like white women active in the club movement, Black women too enlarged the concept of domesticity to include area interests of club women.[29] They held mothers' meetings involving discussions on "child culture" and "social purity." They believed that a "woman's true calling is to make peoples' lives better."

The combined efforts of Black and white women were essential for the progress of Blacks and peaceful race relations. Women believed that Christianizing the home and education were key to solving the race problem.[30] Black women identified with Esther, who acted as an intermediary for her race. Through them, as through Esther, the race would be saved and lifted to greater heights; African Americans would receive deliverance.

A clear, strong, voice within the Black Church carried the mild rhetoric of Black women to its furthest extension. For women like Mrs. G. D. Oldham of Tennessee, women were to be ministers, not slaves to their homes.[31] Lucy Wilmot Smith, speaking in 1886 to a predominantly male audience in a church, stated, "It is one of the evils of the day that from babyhood girls are taught to look forward to the time when they will be supported by a father, a brother, or somebody else's brother."[32]

The image of woman as loyal and comforting spouse from the cult of true womanhood was transcended as Black women embraced Jesus. The stress was on an ultimate allegiance to God, not to men. In a strictly biblical appeal, women yoked their faith, with its requirement for support and kindness, with women's domestic image as comforter to support a public responsibility to prophesy and spread the gospel.[33]

Most club members were active church workers or at least attended church. Churches were the major benevolent, spiritual, and social institutions of the African American community.[34] The Black Church opened its doors for the women of the club movement. The first national organization for club women, the 1896 convention of the National Association of Colored Women, was held at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Of the following fifteen national meetings between 1901 and 1930, eight were held in churches.

The second organization affecting Black club women on a national level was the National Association of Colored Women. This organization focused on the uplift of the Black peasant woman and the improvement of Negro family life.[35] As Wilson Moses notes, one of its goals was to introduce the standards of Victorian domesticity into the cabins of Georgia and Alabama sharecroppers. There was a decided class bias in the organization, with the most influential and dominant members coming from the emerging Black middle class.

Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin was a major force in this organization and in the Black woman's club movement in general. Ruffin founded the Women's Era Club on the belief that the Black women's club movement should be involved in temperance, morality, higher education, and hygienic and domestic questions.[36] The club founded a newspaper, *The Woman's Era*. The paper reflected concerns of the club and, in particular, Ruffin's concerns. It was uncompromising in its defense of Black womanhood and in its condemnation of lynching.

The club movement gave Black women an outlet to express their social witness based on their Christian faith. Their passion for social change and racial uplift revitalized the Black community. The organizations women created addressed specific yet universal problems in the Black community. The women did not allow denominational differences to prevent their uniting to form the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Indeed, the women were so effective in their work that W. E. B. DuBois called for Black men to support women's suffrage because of the emerging role Black women were playing as "the intellectual leadership of the race."[37] The work Black women took on was a frontal assault on Jim Crow, blending secular and religious concerns into effective social action.

From this vital base, Black women in the churches have moved into the late twentieth century refining, adopting, discovering, and acting on strategies for effective social change and religious transformation. This, at times, has been an uphill struggle, given the deep structural sexism of the Black Church. The distinction between speaking and teaching as feminine activities and preaching as a masculine one remains a stubborn stumbling block to creating an effective Black Church witness. However, many women and men refuse to allow such an inefficient and ineffective sexual division of labor to cut short the variety of gifts women have to offer. Educators such as Mary McLeod Bethune (document 6), Anna Julia Cooper (document 5), Ida B. Wells-Barnett (document 4), and Nannie Helen Burroughs (document 10) grounded their teaching in a deep faith that demanded they share their gifts with other African Americans. Even in churches that refuse to ordain women, women serve in roles and offices that afford them the same ministries as men—the major distinction being the title.

Black women offered an internal critique of their subordinate roles in the church. Sara Duncan was forthright in her defense of women's missionary efforts (document 7). Her refusal to bow to male opinion about the proper missionary work for Black women pointed the way to a growing resistance by many religious Black women to confine their ministry to accepted roles and expectations. Duncan's defense came in the midst of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Holiness movement in the South. The Holiness movement produced denominations that ordained women to all of the functions of ministry. The Church of God in Christ has its origins in this movement.

When a disagreement concerning the doctrine of the Pentecost split the Church of God in Christ, the pro-Pentecost faction remained in control of the original church charter and the legal right to use the name Church of God in Christ. The first legally organized Pentecostal denomination arose from this split. Among Blacks, Holiness and Pentecostal churches are called "the Sanctified Church."

Women in the Church of God in Christ developed strong women's departments that functioned with near autonomy, since the women were subordinate to and cooperative with their bishops. Although generally regarded as otherwordly theologically, Sanctified Church women participated in the movement for racial uplift (document 8) alongside their Baptist and Methodist sisters.

Black Roman Catholic women were faced with many of the same obstacles to practicing the fullness of their call as their Protestant sisters. The National Black Sisters' Conference (document 9) has played an important role for Black Catholic women. Black sisters and nuns are active participants in the ministry of the Catholic Church in the United States. The National Black Sisters' Conference has worked with the National Office of Black Catholics to help shape a more relevant and responsive Catholic Church to the needs of Black Catholics.

As Black women move into the twenty-first century, the experiences of Black women, men, and children are the grist for the mill of religious and theological reflection. A key source for this is found in the writings of Black women authors. Novels written by Black women often have a deep spiritual and moral undergirding. Zora Neale Hurston's character the Reverend John Buddy Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* preaches a powerful sermon entitled "The Wounds of Jesus," based on Zechariah 13:6 and Isaiah 53 (document 11). The sermon in the Clearing in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is on the nature of grace (document 12). The writings of Black women novelists echo the work Black women do in their faith communities and in society. The African American woman of this era, like her foremothers, refuses to bend to the yoke of silence. The work of God is too important in a land in which there is no hiding place from injustice.

The late twentieth century has also seen the rise of African American women as scholars in theological academic discourse. Black women scholars are active in shaping the direction and content of all the major theological disciplines. The same activism found in the life of the church is also at the heart of the emerging body of womanist theological reflection.

The womanist witness arises out of Alice Walker's four-part definition, in which she describes the origins of the term *womanist*[38] from the Black folk expression "You're acting womanish!" This signals, first, a young Black girl's proclivity for inquiring about the nature and fairness of life. Second, Black women exercise concern and responsibility for the survival of the African American community—male, female, young, old, gay, lesbian, straight, rich, poor. The third part of the definition celebrates and affirms the beauty of the Black woman as an individual and her love of the Spirit—regardless. The final part of the definition—"Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender"—is a critique of the incomplete analysis of traditional white feminism, which neglects a rigorous race, gender, and class analysis.

Ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon provides an important link between Walker's literary work and formal theo-ethical reflection. Cannon is an early voice in womanist religious thought. Her essay "Moral Wisdom in the Black Women's Literary Tradition" (document 13) explores how Black women's literature can help explain and interpret Black sociocultural patterns. From this, ethical values will emerge. The work of theologians Delores Williams (document 14) and Jacquelyn Grant (document 15) are foundational voices as well. Each situates womanist theological reflection in the context of Black women's struggles for the survival of the community. Williams offers a helpful critique and reinterpretation of feminism in the "Black woman's tongue." Grant provides a rigorous argument for Black women's experience as the crucible for womanist theology. The work of sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes is an excellent representative of the interdisciplinary nature of womanist religious thought. Her essay "'Mother to the Motherless, Father to the Fatherless': Power, Gender, and Community in an Afrocentric Biblical Tradition" (document 16) is a theological and sociocultural study of the way African Americans use the Bible as an interpretive tool for religious reflection and survival under oppression.

These early voices have been joined by womanist scholars in various theological disciplines. In biblical interpretation, Clarice Martin and Renita Weems explore womanist implications in the New Testament and

Elizabeth Freeman (Mumbet), a slave in Massachusetts, won her suit for freedom under the United States Constitution, which says that all *men* are created free and equal.

Abolitionist, reformer, and women's rights advocate Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was one of the most famous Black women of the nineteenth century. Her social commitments were based on a deep religious faith.

Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784), poet. This portrait appeared as the frontispiece of her poems published in 1773.

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955), a leading Black educator, founded Daytona Normal and Industrial School for Negro Girls, which became Bethune-Cookman College. Active in the Black women's club movement, she founded the National Council of Negro Women.

Bishop Ida Robinson, founder of Mt. Sinai Holy Churches of America, Inc.

Nannie Helen Burroughs (1883–1961), educator and Baptist leader, founded the Women's Day in Baptist churches, which spread to other denominations. The Women's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention and the Progressive National Baptist Convention are inheritors of her legacy.

Black preacher Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915) was one of the most powerful evangelists and effective missionaries of the nineteenth century. James Thoburn, Methodist Episcopal bishop, testified that he had learned more of actual value to him from Amanda Smith than from any other person.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931), a crusading journalist, lecturer, and club woman, campaigned for rights of Black people, particularly Black women. She fought against lynching and racial segregation, organized the first Black women's suffrage organization, and was active in the settlement house movement.

Hebrew Bible, respectively. Ethicists such as Toinette Eugene, Marcia Riggs, and Cheryl Saunders offer new ways to understand the interstructured nature of oppression. Theologians Karen Baker-Fletcher, M. Shawn Copeland, Kelly Brown Douglass, and Diana Hayes expand the womanist theological canon. Each womanist scholar builds on the Black Church tradition and critiques it. They are engaged in work our souls must have to survive in times such as these and beyond. They are inheritors of a centuries-old dynamic witness for the personal and corporate liberation of a whole people.

Documents

THE COLONIAL ERA

Document 1. Phillis Wheatley: Colonial Evangelical Piety

Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) was the property of the wealthy Boston merchant John Wheatley. Because the young Phillis was bright, John Wheatley educated her and treated her as more a daughter than a slave. Her intellectual prowess and her race won her the label of prodigy in her youth. The Countess of Huntingdon in England was so impressed with Phillis after being entertained by her that she arranged for the publication of her verses. Phillis died in poverty after the Wheatley household dispersed due to marriage and death. In the letter written to her friend Arbour Tanner, the nineteen-year-old Wheatley reveals her evangelical Christianity.[39]

Boston, May 19th, 1772

Dear Sister,—I rec'd your favour of February 6th for which I give you my sincere thanks. I greatly rejoice with you in that realizing view, and I hope experience, of the saving change which you so emphatically describe. Happy were it for us if we could arrive to that evangelical Repentance, and the true holiness of heart which you mention. Inexpressibly happy should we be could we have a due sense of the beauties

and excellence of the crucified Saviour. In his Crucifixion may be seen marvellous displays of Grace and Love, sufficient to draw and invite us to the rich and endless treasures of his mercy; let us rejoice in and adore the wonders of God's infinite Love in bringing us from a land semblant of darkness itself, and where the divine light of revelation (being obscur'd) is as darkness. Here the knowledge of the true God and eternal life are made manifest; but there, profound ignorance overshadows the land. Your observation is true, namely, that there was nothing in us to recommend us to God. Many of our fellow creatures are pass'd by, when the bowels of divine love expanded towards us. May this goodness & long suffering of God lead us to unfeign'd repentance.

It gives me very great pleasure to hear of so many of my nation, seeking with eagerness the way of true felicity. O may we all meet at length in that happy mansion. I hope the correspondence between us will continue, (my being much indispos'd this winter past, was the reason of my not answering yours before now) which correspondence I hope may have the happy effect of improving our mutual friendship. Till we meet in the regions of consummate blessedness, let us endeavor by the assistance of divine grace, to live the life, and we shall die the death of the Righteous. May this be our happy case, and of those who are travelling to the region of Felicity, is the earnest request of your affectionate

Friend & humble servant. Phillis Wheatley

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Document 2. Amanda Berry Smith: Conversion Through Wrestling with the Devil

Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915) received sanctification in 1868 and dedicated herself to a life of evangelical piety. Her vivid conversion came after a life that featured two unhappy marriages and work as a washerwoman. Her conversion led her to a ministry of preaching at Holiness camp meetings in the United States and Britain. She also led evangelical crusades to Africa and India. This she did although never ordained. In this excerpt from her autobiography, Smith describes her own conversion through a struggle with the devil and God.[40]

. . . On Tuesday, the 17th day of March, 1856, I was sitting in the kitchen by my ironing table, thinking it all over. The Devil seemed to say to me (I know now it was he), "You have prayed to be converted."

I said, "Yes."

"You have been sincere."

"Yes."

"You have been in earnest."

"Yes."

"You have read your Bible, and you have fasted, and you really want to be converted."

"Yes, Lord. Thou knowest it; Thou knowest my heart, I really want to be converted."

Then Satan said, "Well, if God were going to convert you He would have done it long ago; He does His work quick, and with all your sincerity God has not converted you."

"Yes, that is so."

"You might as well give it up, then" said he, "it is no use, He won't hear you."

"Well, I guess I will just give it up. I suppose I will be damned and I might as well submit to my fate." Just then a voice whispered to me clearly, and said, "Pray once more." And in an instant I said, "I will." Then another voice seemed like a person speaking to me, and it said, "Don't you do it."

"Yes, I will."

And when I said, "Yes, I will," it seemed to me the emphasis was on the "will," and I felt it from the crown of my head clear through me, "I WILL," and I got on my feet and said, "I will pray once more, and if there is any such thing as salvation, I am determined to have it this afternoon or die."

I got up, put the kettle on, set the table and went into the cellar and got on my knees to pray and die, for I thought I had made a vow to God and that He would certainly kill me, and I didn't care, I was so miserable, and I was just at the verge of desperation. I had put everything on the table but the bread and butter, and I said, "If any one calls me I won't get up, and if the bread and butter is all that is to go on the table, Miss Sue [the daughter] can finish the supper, and that will save them calling for me, and when they come down cellar after it they will find me dead!" . . .

I prayed the third time, using these same words. Then somehow I seemed to get to the end of everything. I did not know what else to say or do. Then in my desperation I looked up and said, "O, Lord, if Thou wilt help me I will believe Thee," and in the act of telling God I would, I did. O, the peace and joy that flooded my soul! The burden rolled away; I felt it when it left me, and a flood of light and joy swept through my soul such as I had never known before. I said, "Why, Lord, I do believe this is just what I have been asking for," and down came another flood of light and peace. And I said again, "Why, Lord, I do believe this is what I have asked Thee for." Then I sprang to my feet, all around was light, I was new. I looked at my hands, they looked new. I took hold of myself and said, "Why, I am new, I am new all over." I clapped my hands; I ran up out of the cellar, I walked up and down the kitchen floor. Praise the Lord! There seemed to be a halo of light all over me; the change was so real and so thorough that I have often said that if I had been as black as ink or as green as grass or as white as snow, I would not have been frightened. I went into the dining room; we had a large mirror that went from the floor to the ceiling, and I went and looked in it to see if anything had transpired in my color, because there was something wonderful had taken place inside of me, and it really seemed to me it was outside too, and as I looked in the glass I cried out, "Hallelujah, I have got religion; glory to God. I have got religion!" I was wild with delight and joy; it seemed to me as if I would split! I went out into the kitchen and I thought what will I do, I have got to wait till Sunday before I can tell anybody. This was on Tuesday; Sunday was my day in town, so I began to count the days, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. O, it seemed to me the days were weeks long. My! can I possibly stand it till Sunday? I must tell somebody, and as I passed by the ironing table it seemed as if it had a halo of light all around it, and I ran up to the table and smote it with my hand and shouted, "Glory to God, I have got religion!"

Document 3. Sojourner Truth: The Conversion of a Female Slave

Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was born a slave in New York State. Until 1843 she was known as Isabella, but she changed her name to reflect her changed heart and mission. She gained her freedom in 1827 and wandered the country in response to mystical voices and preached that God was loving and kind. Truth is the most famous Black female religious figure in the antebellum period. Her narrative, penned by Olive Gilbert in 1850, is one of the few accounts of Black women's religious experience in the nineteenth century. The following excerpt relates her conversion, which took place when she was in her twenties.[41]

She talked to God as familiarly as if he had been a creature like herself; and a thousand times more so, than if she had been in the presence of some earthly potentate. She demanded, with little expenditure of reverence or fear, a supply of all her more pressing wants, and at times her demands approached very near to commands. She felt as if God was under obligation to her, much more than she was to him. He seemed to her benighted vision in some manner bound to do her bidding. . . .

. . . She says that God revealed himself to her, with all the suddenness of a flash of lightning, showing her, "in the twinkling of an eye, that he was *all over*"—that he pervaded the universe—"and that there was no place where God was not." She became instantly conscious of her great sin in forgetting her almighty Friend and "ever-present help in time of trouble." All her unfulfilled promises arose before her, like a vexed sea whose waves run mountains high; and her soul, which seemed but one mass of lies, shrunk back aghast from the "awful look" of Him whom she had formerly talked to, as if he had been a being like herself; and she would now fain have hid herself in the bowels of the earth, to have escaped his dread presence. But she plainly saw there was no place, not even in hell, where he was not: and where could she flee? Another such "a look," as she expressed it, and she felt that she must be extinguished forever, even as one, with the breath of his mouth, "blows out a lamp," so that no spark remains.

. . . [She said,] "Oh, God, I did not know you were so big," walked into the house, and made an effort to resume her work. But the workings of the inward man were too absorbing to admit of much attention to her avocations. She desired to talk to God, but her vileness utterly forbade it, and she was not able to prefer a petition. "What!" said she, "shall I lie again to God? I have told him nothing but lies; and shall I speak again, and tell another lie to God?" She could not; and now she began to wish for someone to speak to God for her. Then a space

seemed opening between her and God, and she felt that if some one, who was worthy in the sight of heaven, would but plead *for* her in their own name, and not let God know it came from *her,* who was so unworthy, God might grant it. At length a friend appeared to stand between herself and an insulted Deity; and she felt as sensibly refreshed as when, on a hot day, an umbrella had been interposed between her scorching head and a burning sun. But who was this friend? became the next inquiry. Was it Deencia, who had so often befriended her? She looked at her with her new power of sight—and, lo! she, too, seemed all "bruises and putrefying sores," like herself. No, it was some one very different from Deencia.

"Who *are* you?" she exclaimed, as the vision brightened into a form distinct, beaming with the beauty of holiness, and radiant with love. She then said, audibly addressing the mysterious visitant—"I *know* you, and I *don't* know you." Meaning, "You seem perfectly familiar; I feel that you not only love me, but that you *always* have loved me—yet I know you not—I cannot call you by name." When she said, "I know you," the subject of the vision remained distinct and quiet. When she said, "I don't know you," it moved restlessly about, like agitated waters. So while she repeated without intermission, "I know you, I know you," that the vision might remain—"Who are you?" was the cry of her heart, and her whole soul was in one deep prayer that this heavenly personage might be revealed to her, and remain with her. At length, after bending both soul and body with the intensity of this desire, till breath and strength seemed failing, and she could maintain her position no longer, an answer came to her, saying distinctly, "It is Jesus." "Yes," she responded, "it is *Jesus.*"

Previous to these exercises of mind, she heard Jesus mentioned in reading or speaking, but had received from what she heard no impression that he was any other than an eminent man, like a Washington or a Lafayette. Now he appeared to her delighted mental vision as so mild, so good, and so every way lovely, and he loved her so much! And, how strange that he had always loved her, and she had never known it! And how great a blessing he conferred, in that he should stand between her and God! And God was no longer a terror and a dread to her.

Document 4. Ida B. Wells-Barnett: Living in the New Jerusalem

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931) was a turn-of-the-century social reformer. She led the antilynching crusade in this country, agitated for women's suffrage, was active in the club movement, and worked in the settlement house movement in Chicago. Her pen as a journalist was swift and incisive. In the following excerpt, Wells-Barnett is visiting twelve Black men unfairly jailed in Elaine, Arkansas, on the charge of inciting a riot.[42]

When we came into the building in which these twelve men were incarcerated, we were readily admitted. Mrs. Moore, the leading spirit among the wives, who was well known because of her frequent visits, said, "Boys, come and shake hands with my cousin who has come from Saint Louis to see me." The iron bars were wide enough apart to enable us to shake hands. The one guard on duty sat about fifty feet away reading the Sunday paper. When he looked up, he saw only a group of insignificant looking colored women who had been there many times before so he went on reading his paper.

When we got up close to the bars, Mrs. Moore whispered, "This is Mrs. Barnett from Chicago." An expression of joy spread over their faces, but I put my finger to my lips and cautioned them not to let on, and immediately a mask seemed to drop over the features of each one. I talked with them about their experiences, asking them to write down everything they could recollect about the rioting, and what befell each of them. . . .

Then Mrs. Moore said, "Boys, don't you want to sing for my cousin?" Whereupon they sang a song of their own composition and many others. . . . I listened to those men sing and pray and give testimony from their overburdened hearts, and sometimes the women would take up the refrain. They shed tears and they got "happy," and the burden of their talk and their prayers was of the hereafter.

Finally I got up and walked close to the bars and said to them in a low tone, "I have been listening to you for nearly two hours. You have talked and sung and prayed about dying, and forgiving your enemies, and of feeling sure that you are going to be received in the New

Jerusalem because your God knows that you are innocent of the offense for which you expect to be electrocuted. But why don't you pray to live and ask to be freed? The God you serve is the God of Paul and Silas who opened their prison gates, and if you have all the faith you say you have, you ought to believe that he will open your prison doors too.

"If you do believe that, let all of your songs and prayers hereafter be songs of faith and hope that God will set you free; that the judges who have to pass on your cases will be given the wisdom and courage to decide in your behalf. That is all I've got to say. Quit talking about dying; if you believe your God is all powerful, believe he is powerful enough to open these prison doors, and say so. Dying is the last thing you ought to even think about, much less talk about. Pray to live and believe you are going to get out."

I went away and spent nearly all night writing down the experiences of the women who were also put in prison in Helena, and within two days I had written statements of each of those twelve men and the facts I had requested. It is a terrible indictment of white civilization and Christianity. It shows that the white people did just what they accused the Negroes of doing: murdered them and stole their crops, their stock, and their household goods. And even then they were invoking the law to put the seal of approval on their deeds by legally (?) executing those twelve men who were found guilty after six minutes' deliberation!

Document 5. Anna Julia Cooper: Women and the Regeneration and Progress of the Race

Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964) was one of the most highly educated and intellectual Black women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She served as principal for the M Street School in Washington, D.C., from 1901 to 1906. There she introduced college preparatory subjects to the curriculum. In 1925 Cooper received her Ph.D. from the Sorbonne in France. She returned to Washington to serve as principal of Dunbar High School. In her retirement, she served as president of Frelinghuysen University, a school for Black working adults in Washington, D.C. The following excerpt, from her book, *A Voice from the South,* was read at a convocation of the Black clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1886.[43]

By laying down for woman the same code of morality, the same standard of purity, as for man; by refusing to countenance the shameless and equally guilty monsters who were gloating over her fall,—graciously stooping in all the majesty of his own spotlessness to wipe away the filth and grime of her guilty past and bid her go in peace and sin no more; . . . throughout his life and in his death he has given to men a rule and guide for the estimation of woman as an equal, as a helper, as a friend, and as a sacred charge to be sheltered and cared for with a brother's love and sympathy, lessons which nineteen centuries' gigantic strides in knowledge, arts, and sciences, in social and ethical principles have not been able to probe to their depth or to exhaust in practice.

. . . Only the BLACK WOMAN can say "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the *whole Negro race enters with me.*" Is it not evident then that as individual workers for this race we must address ourselves with no half-hearted zeal to this feature of our mission. The need is felt and must be recognized by all. There is a call for workers, for missionaries, for men and women with the double consecration of a fundamental love of humanity and a desire for its melioration through the Gospel; but superadded to this we demand an intelligent and sympathetic comprehension of the interests and special needs of the Negro. . . .

. . . It is a mistake to suppose that the Negro is prejudiced against a white ministry. Naturally there is not a more kindly and implicit follower of a white man's guidance than the average colored peasant. What would to others be an ordinary act of friendly or pastoral interest he would be more inclined to regard gratefully as a condescension. And he never forgets such kindness. Could the Negro be brought near to his white priest or bishop, he is not suspicious. He is not only willing but often longs to unburden his soul to this intelligent guide. There are no reservations when he is convinced that you are his friend. It is a saddening satire on American history and manners that it takes something to convince him.

That our people are not "drawn" to a church whose chief dignitaries they see only in the chancel, and whom they reverence as they would a painting or an angel, whose life never comes down to and

touches theirs with the inspiration of an objective reality, may be "perplexing" truly (American caste and American Christianity both being facts) but it need not be surprising. There must be something of human nature in it, the same as that which brought about that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" that He might "draw" us towards God.

Men are not "drawn" by abstractions. Only sympathy and love can draw, and until our Church in America realizes this and provides a clergy that can come in touch with our life and have a fellow feeling for our woes, without being imbedded and frozen up in their "Gothic antipathies," the good bishops are likely to continue "perplexed " by the sparsity of colored Episcopalians. . . .

. . . The institution of the Church in the South to which she mainly looks for the training of her colored clergy and for the help of the "Black Woman" and "Colored Girl" of the South, has graduated since the year 1868, when the school was founded, *five young women*;[44] and while yearly numerous young men have been kept and trained for the ministry by the charities of the Church, the number of indigent females who have here been supported, sheltered and trained, is phenomenally small. Indeed, to my mind, the attitude of the Church toward this feature of her work is as if the solution of the problem of Negro missions depended solely on sending a quota of deacons and priests into the field, girls being a sort of *tertium quid* whose development may be promoted if they can pay their way and fall in with the plans mapped out for the training of the other sex. Now I would ask in all earnestness, does not this force potential deserve by education and stimulus to be made dynamic? Is it not a solemn duty incumbent on all colored churchmen to make it so? Will not the aid of the Church be given to prepare our girls in head, heart, and hand for the duties and responsibilities that await the intelligent wife, the Christian mother, the earnest, virtuous, helpful woman, at once both the lever and the fulcrum for uplifting the race?

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Document 6. Mary McLeod Bethune: Leaving a Legacy

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955) was one of the most powerful national Black leaders. She embodied service to the community through a deep sense of Christian duty and calling. In her early years she held several teaching positions in the United States and Africa. She founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial School for Negro Girls in Daytona Beach, Florida (1904), which later became Bethune-Cookman College. She was active in the club movement and founded the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) in 1935, which served as an umbrella organization for most of the Black women's clubs of the era. Bethune was ecumenical and interfaith as she was educated by the Presbyterians, an active and committed Methodist, a member of the Executive Board of the Council of Church Women, and an honorary member of Hadassah. This excerpt is a "Last Will and Testament" for her people.[45]

Sometimes I ask myself if I have any legacy to leave. My worldly possessions are few. Yet, my experiences have been rich. From them I have distilled principles and policies in which I firmly believe. Perhaps, in them there is something of value. So as my life draws to a close, I will pass them on to Negroes everywhere in the hope that this philosophy may give them inspiration. Here, then, is my legacy:

I LEAVE YOU LOVE. Injuries quickly forgotten quickly pass away. Personally and racially, our enemies must be forgiven. Our aim must be to create a world of fellowship and justice where no man's color or religion is held against him. "Love thy neighbor" is a precept which could transform the world if it were universally practiced. It connotes brotherhood and to me, brotherhood of man is the noblest concept of all human relationships. Loving your neighbor means being interracial, interreligious and international.

I LEAVE YOU HOPE. Yesterday, our ancestors endured the degradation of slavery, yet they retained their dignity. Today, we direct our economic and political strength toward winning a more abundant and

secure life. Tomorrow, a new Negro, unhindered by race taboos and shackles, will benefit from this striving and struggling.

I LEAVE YOU A THIRST FOR EDUCATION. More and more, Negroes are taking full advantage of hard-won opportunities for learning, and the educational level of the Negro population is at its highest point in history. We are making greater use of the privileges inherent in living in a democracy. Now that the barriers are crumbling everywhere, the Negro in America must be ever vigilant lest his forces be marshalled behind wrong causes and undemocratic movements. . . . He must not lend his support to any group that seeks to subvert democracy.

I LEAVE YOU FAITH. Faith is the first factor in a life devoted to service. Without faith, nothing is possible. With it, nothing is impossible. Faith in God is the greatest power, but great faith too is faith in oneself. The faith of the American Negro in himself has grown immensely, and is still increasing. The measure of our progress as a race is in precise relation to the depth of the faith in our people held by our leaders.

I LEAVE YOU RACIAL DIGNITY. I want Negroes to maintain their human dignity at all costs. We, as Negroes, must recognize that we are the custodians as well as the heirs of a great civilization. As a race we have given something to the world, and for this we are proud and fully conscious of our place in the total picture of mankind's development.

I LEAVE YOU A DESIRE TO LIVE HARMONIOUSLY WITH YOUR FELLOW MEN. The problem of color is world wide, on every continent. I appeal to all to recognize their common problems, and unite to solve them. So often our difficulties have made us supersensitive and truculent. I want to see my people conduct themselves in all relationships, fully conscious of their responsibilities and deeply aware of their heritage. We are a minority of fifteen million living side by side with a white majority of 177 million. We must learn to deal with people positively and on an individual basis.

I LEAVE YOU FINALLY A RESPONSIBILITY TO OUR YOUNG PEOPLE. Our children must never lose their zeal for building a better world. They must not be discouraged from aspiring toward greatness, for they are to be leaders of tomorrow. We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends.

Faith, courage, brotherhood, dignity, ambition, responsibility—these are needed today as never before. We must cultivate them and use them as tools for our task of completing the establishment of equality for the Negro. We must sharpen these tools in the struggle that faces us and find new ways of using them. The Freedom Gates are half a-jar. We must pry them fully open.

If I have a legacy to leave my people, it is my philosophy of living and serving. As I face tomorrow, I am content. I pray now that my philosophy may be helpful to those who share my vision of a world of Peace.

Document 7. Sara Duncan: Vital Questions

By 1904 the Southern women of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) had begun a second missionary society designed to help alleviate some of the social injustices and inhumane conditions Blacks in the South had to endure. However, many in the denomination did not believe that women could or ought to carry out this additional missionary endeavor. Sara Duncan rose to the occasion and challenged the opinion that the older Women's Parent Mite Missionary Society was the suitable place for all AME women's work.[46]

1st. In perusing the different church papers accumulated during my two months' absence, engaged in the missionary field, I find in the issue of the *Christians Recorder* of December 3, an article from a brother on "Vital Questions—Our Missionary Department." And I wish to say a word to the good brother who seems not to have kept up with the correct records of the missionary department, though were it not for and in defense of the dear sisters who have worked so very hard the past seven years to keep alive the department of Home and Foreign Missions, I should keep quiet, but for their dear sakes "can not hold my peace."

As one of the leaders in the missionary work in this section since 1897, I have traveled to some extent in the South and Southwest, with a chance now and then to look in upon the workers in the North and East. We have made a careful study of the same, perhaps more largely than our brother, having done but little else during these seven years.

Some of the points made by our brother are well taken and others are not; we feel them an injustice.

In the second clause of his argument, "Parents' Mite Missionaries," he expresses himself, regretting that the General Conference was unable to so adjust matters as to bring them under one head, viz: Women's Mite Missionary Society. And the organization that was doing real work is the W. M. Missionary Society, even though it exists only in the first, second, third, fourth and fifth districts, and the other section which is by far the stronger—yea, five times as strong—being the domain of the southern Woman's Home and Foreign Missionary Society. If the W. M. M. Society was allowed to enter the strongholds of the South and take such well organized shape as it has in the Northern and Western sections of our church, where our memberships are not so large by virtue of the sections of the country, then we would behold an income of $15,000. in the women's department alone, which would make it such an important factor in the missionary work of our church that our department could meet every obligation with which it might be encumbered and plan for broadening its scope of activity, thus carrying the church in undeveloped regions at home and abroad.

We first ask a question, where peace reigns, why will some persist in stirring up strife?

Nothing good can come out of confusion.

Since the General Conference has and did arrange in 1896, to have two missionary societies, why can not we work more, strive harder, leaving the rest with God?

And since there are so many things of vital interest to the church to be brought before the General Conference, why not let the women alone, and let them be in harmony, doing the will of the Master as best they can.

1st. Our brother is quite mistaken when he says all but the district's is operated by the W. H. & F. M. [Women's Home and Foreign Missionary] Society. He must search the records closely.

2nd. We emphatically deny "that it is the W. M. M. Society that is doing the real work," as our report to the coming General Conference will show; we are proud to be able to agree with our brother and say the W. M. M. Society is a grand and noble organization, and we would and will always be an helper rather than a hindrance; yet, at the same time,

look out for that placed in our hands by the church that it may be preserved and prosper.

In '96 we started out with hardly a constitution to work by and not an organization of any kind, subject to the general church, only a few Home Mission Societies in a few churches for the benefit of the immediate communities, and when pastored by a few ministers who had the spirit of missions, would send from two to three dollars to the Annual Conference, and thought something had been done.

We feel that we speak for the sisters of both organizations when we say that the General Conference of the A.M.E. Church settled the matter in 1900 once for all, and there is no dissension among them, they are each working with might and main to have good reports at each annual conference, and each General Conference, and have no time to wrangle over what the name of the society is, or should be.

Document 8. Church of God in Christ: 1941 Annual Convocation Minutes

Although subordinate, the women of the 1941 national convocation of the Church of God in Christ were not marginal to the proceedings. The minutes highlight the connection between the women's department and the National Council of Negro Women. This connection dispels the stereotypical notion that the Sanctified Church (Black Holiness and Pentecostal churches) shuns social change and racial uplift. Along with showing their efficiency in raising money, the minutes also show the role of the district missionary and the separation of these roles from marital ties. The Sanctified Church went further than other Black churches in separating women's leadership roles from their marital relationships. Among the tasks of the district missionary was to inform and remind the churches in the district of their responsibilities toward the local church, district, state, and national work. This task, to be done at least twice a year, held within it the potential for conflict of interest. Such conflicts were addressed in the National Convocation.[47] An interesting note about the convocation is that the United States entered World War II at this time; it is referred to in the minutes only in the women's concern for several missionaries.[48]

We had greetings from State Mother Hale, Southern California who came forth singing, "All Things in Jesus Supplied" for God wills his saints to live righteously in this world. She told of God's help as a physician in child-bearing when all other help had failed. Her message was both spiritual discernment and a help to expectant mothers. . . .

From our Assistant General Mother L. Coffey we received greetings and she thanked God for God's blessing on the Senior leaders, Eld. C. H. Mason and Mother Lizzie Roberson. "Many officials of this church have been stricken, yet their lives are tied up in their work. And all their energy is given to the uplift of the work. Promotion does not take one out of service. We should serve for there is plenty of service to render. I am a servant of the most high God. God gave me this appointment and no man can take it from me." Mother Coffey was blessed to have a consideration opened for her through Pres. [of Saints Academy] Arenia Mallory, to attend the National Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, as a representative of the Church of God in Christ; not as an invited guest but as a leader and a guest of the President's honored wife, Mrs. E. Roosevelt; together with Mrs. Bethune, as president of this organization and the many other women of national repute. We know of no one more eligible for such a position, and to embrace such an occasion, to express herself on "Religious Morale." Also, among the noble women present we were happy to hear of the presence in this meeting of Miss Arenia Mallory, Pres., Saints Industrial School, Lexington, Mississippi and Mrs. Alice Mason Amos, daughter of Bishop Mason. Each had a voice in this meeting. God has given them wisdom to come before rulers and magistrates.

Much praise was accorded the Sisters for attending the call of Gen. Mother Roberson. Over $17,000 was sent in to our Gen. Mother and it made the heart of the Senior Bishop glad in receiving. Financial support was promised by all.

God's favor was to us in that he touched the body of our General Mother and brought her as it were from the dead, and let her be at her post of duty. As she appeared in our midst, accompanied by her beautiful and loyal daughter, Sister Ida Baker, our hearts overflowed with joy. Just to see her, comforted hearts that had been in sorrow. Her appearance was made possible by the love extended to her by her executive board of women. Assistant General Mother L. Coffey asked for absolute

quietness to reign, and the Saints of God to arise at her coming, in honor of her presence in the room. Great was the demonstration, in God. Tears of joy were shed. She wanted all to know that she was not dead. She is the National Mother exercising all the power invested in her by Senior Bishop Mason, in the organizing of the Women's work. . . . We listened to the touching testimony of her daughter, Sis. Baker, as to her untiring care of Mother. Questions were asked Mother concerning the power invested in District Missionaries and those excluded from serving. Those not serving are Minister's wives in the same district with the husband. They are privileged to work in any other district. All district missionaries are subject to the State Mother. No district Missionaries are to be called "Supervisors." Her appointments are under the supervision of her State Mother: both working in cooperation. Many instructions were given to State Mothers and Workers. . . .

We waited in high expectancy for Mothers Day Service. A beautiful program was arranged by our Assistant General Mother L. Coffey, one whom Mother styles as her "eyes, feet, hands, and ears"; and left this edict with all her daughters: "Do what she tells you to do because she speaks my words." At the appointed hour (Tues., Dec. 9) seated on the platform were 34 State Supervisors. We beheld our General Mother walking down the aisle in all the dignity of her office. Our hopes and prayers were realized. . . . Mother gave her daughters more instructions. Speaking, she said, that it was the part of the State Mother to defend the Overseer, and should the wife be serving with him in the capacity of District Missionary (in case of misunderstanding) it would become a husband and wife issue; for wife or husband will defend one another. People do not want all the church to be consolidated in one house. Go from this meeting and make the changes, then come back to a new appointment. . . .

Document 9. National Black Sisters' Conference: Statement of Purpose

In 1968 Black women from the several congregations of Black women religious organized the National Black Sisters' Conference. The following is from their statement of purpose.[49]

The members of the National Black Sisters' Conference pledge to work unceasingly for the liberation of black people. Black religious women see themselves as gifted with the choicest of God's blessings.

The gift of our blackness gives us our mandate for the deliverance of a special people, our own black people. And the gift of our religious vocation makes accessible to us that union with Christ which guides us to the task, strengthens our determination, and sustains our efforts.

Black sisters are fully aware of that great WEALTH OF PERSON which is the rich heritage of black people in America. The National Black Sisters' Conference appreciates most deeply that total black experience, that indefinable yet identifiable "soul" which is our proud possession.

The communal concern of black folk is our greatest asset. It is the cornerstone of our endeavor to deliver a people who will carry on the great work to which Christ has called us, the work of building the Kingdom of God.

The National Black Sisters' Conference is initiating programs that will enable the people to question the reality and validity of what has been presented to them by the Church, formal education, government and by big business: thereby having a greater part in shaping not only our environment but also our future and, most important, the future of our children and we will share this new determination with all who are interested.

Within this context, we believe it is necessary to express ourselves as black religious women.

Document 10. Nannie Helen Burroughs: "The Slabtown District Convention"

Nannie Helen Burroughs (1883–1961) casts a huge and faithful shadow on the work of Black Baptist women. Both the Women's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention and the Progressive National Baptist Convention are inheritors of her legacy. Burroughs, an educator who founded the Women's Day in Baptist churches that then spread to other denominations, wrote the following play to teach proper behavior to women in the church. The play pokes fun at every aspect of a typical convention, although she did not include prayers in the play. This omission was due to her piety. These excerpts are from the address of welcome, response, president's address, and an "appeal for the redemption of Slabtown."[50]

. . . "Members of the Local Missionary Society, citizens and friends: On behalf of the delegates in attendance upon the Tenth Annual Session of the Slabtown Women's District Convention, I accept your welcome, such as it is. We shall hurry up and get through with our business and go home where we can get something to eat. We are sorry you are having such hard times here. Anybody who lived through the drought and the depression certainly can feed and sleep this handful of folks a few days. Of course, you all invited us. . . . But we shall do the best we can and leave as soon as we can. We thank you for your hard-time welcome." . . . "It is now time for our President's address. . . ."

. . . "Fellow officers, delegates, ladies and gentlemen. . . . I have traveled all over Slabtown visiting missionary societies and waking up sleepy leaders. . . . I have gone to a number of missionary societies where there is about as much spiritual life as you would find in a graveyard. . . . Some of you missionary sisters are raising money for missions and paying church debts and making presents to yourselves and your pastors. The Bible asks, 'Will a man rob God?' I answer, yes. A man will not only rob God, but he will get the women to help him. Sisters, it is not right for you to raise money for missions and use it to make presents and pay church debts. . . ."

. . . "And now, to these brethren who come to these conventions to tell the sisters what to do and how to vote, I want to say to you that you are welcome to our meetings, and if you will appreciate the courtesy extended to you by this association, you will go down from this place without any mark of displeasure upon you. But if you come here to use some of these sisters as tools to carry points that will work to your advantage in the distribution of funds and other, we want you to look to the Lord and be dismissed right now. . . ."

. . . "It affords me great pleasure to present Mrs. Betsy Lizzard, to make 'An Appeal for the Redemption of Slabtown.'" . . .

. . . "Sister and Friends: . . . I come in behalf of the schools in our district. I ain't no educated woman, but I got plenty of mother wit and common sense, and I got plenty of old-fashioned pride. I know the

value of education in building up people and in building up communities. We can't get very far in these days without it and I certainly don't want to live in these woods with this raft of children growing up in ignorance. It is dangerous; and, furthermore, it is expensive. . . . It don't mean nothing but disgrace and workhouses and jails to let children grow up uneducated. We've been talkin' about making decent citizens, and I want to know how in the name of common sense we are going to make them when these people don't give our children but a few months of schooling and pay such no 'count salaries that they can't get teachers with sense enough to teach. Sisters, we just got to get the right kind of moral teachers who is properly educated, for the schools. We done had enough of that kind that thinks they are better than anybody else because they got a little education. That's all they have got. They ain't got no common sense and they ain't got influence enough to change a run-down community. Anybody can put on airs. We want teachers who can lift up a community. . . .

. . . "We want people who'll 'sociate with us, show us how to live; how to organize our community work; build up our Sunday schools and missionary societies. Some of them comes to church late, dressed like a lot of peacocks, and sits back and look in pity or scorn on us poor, unlearned critters, and laugh and nudge each other when we make mistakes. . . . There are just a few real ones. There's dear Miss Georgia. . . . She ain't got half the 'plomas that some . . . got, but she's got more character and more sense. . . . She's what I call educated. These other folks are just schooled. She's a model. . . . Look how she speaks to us when she meets us. . . . Look how the boys and girls who go to her school talk her up, and look how many she's put ambition into to go to higher schools and get more education. . . . We want teachers with souls, heads and hands dedicated to the redemption of Slabtown. They are in the world and we must find 'um."

Document 11. Zora Neale Hurston: "The Wounds of Jesus"

Zora Neale Hurston (1901?–1960) was a remarkable novelist, journalist, folklorist, anthropologist, and critic.[51] From 1920 to 1950 she was the most prolific Black woman writer in the United States. Her ability to report with clarity and accuracy the positive aspect of life for poor and marginalized Blacks is a wellspring for exploring the values and morals for our contemporary context. She was a meticulous collector of folklore, legends, superstitions, music, and dance of poor Blacks in the South. Her work helped bring to the fore the rich life of Blacks in the South. The following excerpt is a crucifixion sermon from her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), which was published before, but written after, her first folklore collection, *Mules and Men* (1935).[52]

. . I can see Him step out upon the rim bones of nothing
Crying I am de way
De truth and de light
. . . . . .
I can see Him as He mounted Calvary and hung upon de cross
for our sins.
I can see-eee-ee
De mountains fall to their rocky knees when He cried
"My God, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?"
The mountains fell to their rocky knees and trembled like a
beast
From the stroke of the master's axe
One angel took the flinches of God's eternal power
And bled the veins of the earth
One angel that stood at the gate with a flaming sword
Was so well pleased with his power
Until he pierced the moon with his sword
And she ran down in blood
And de sun
Batted her fiery eyes and put on her judgment robe
And laid down in de cradle of eternity
And rocked herself into sleep and slumber
He died until the great belt in the wheel of time
And de geological strata fell aloose
And a thousand angels rushed to de canopy of heben
With flamin' swords in their hands
And placed their feet upon blue ether's bosom, and looked
back at de dazzlin' throne
And de arc angels had veiled their faces
And de throne was draped in mournin'

And de orchestra had struck silence for the space of half an hour
Angels had lifted their harps to de weepin' willows
And God had looked off to-wards immensity
And blazin' worlds fell off His teeth
And about that time Jesus groaned on de cross, and
Dropped His head in the locks of His shoulder and said, "It is finished, it is finished."
And then de chambers of hell exploded
And de damnable spirits
Come up from de Sodomistic world and rushed into de smoky camps of eternal night,
And cried, "Woe! Woe! Woe!"
And then de Centurion cried out,
"Surely this is the Son of God."
. . . . . .
I heard de whistle of de damnation train
Dat pulled out from Garden of Eden loaded wid cargo goin' to hell
Ran at break-neck speed all de way thru de law
All de way thru de prophetic age
All de way thru de reign of kings and judges—
Plowed her way thru de Jurdan
And on her way to Calvary, when she blew for de switch
Jesus stood out on her track like a rough-backed mountain
And she threw her cow-catcher in His side and His blood ditched de train
He died for our sins.
Wounded in the house of His friends.
That's where I got off de damnation train
And dat's where you must get off, ha!

MOVING INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Document 12. Toni Morrison: Loving the Heart

Toni Morrison (b. 1931), the 1993 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, is a writer of richly textured characters and lyrical story lines that explore the horrors of racism and oppression on the individual and the community. Her novels include *Sula* (1973), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and *Jazz* (1992). The selection below is from her fifth novel, *Beloved* (1987),[53] which won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize. The novel tells of the ravages of slavery through the story of Sethe. *Beloved* has been characterized as both a holocaust novel and an apocalyptic novel.

It was in front of *that* 124 that Sethe climbed off a wagon, her newborn tied to her chest, and felt for the first time the wide arms of her mother-in-law, who had made it to Cincinnati. Who decided that, because slave life had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue," she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart—which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. In winter and fall she carried it to AME's and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed. Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place. In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees.

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees toward her.

"Let your mothers hear you laugh," she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

Then "Let the grown men come," she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

"Let your wives and your children see you dance," she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.

Finally she called the women to her. "Cry," she told them. "For the living and the dead. Just cry." And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.

She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. *You* got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize." Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh.

Document 13. Katie Geneva Cannon: Black Women's Stories and Moral Wisdom

Womanist ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon broke new ground in her critique of traditional ethical theory in her book *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988). In the following excerpt from an earlier essay,[54] Cannon begins to articulate the different worldview of traditional ethical theory, which she terms "dominant ethics," and the reality of African American life in the United States. She turns to the work of Black women writers to illuminate this reality. This use of African American women novelists as a methodological tool for ethical reflection moves contemporary ethics in challenging new directions.

I first began pondering the relationship between faith and ethics as a schoolgirl while listening to my grandmother teach the central affirmations of Christianity within the context of a racially segregated society. My community of faith taught me the principles of God's universal parenthood that engendered a social, intellectual, and cultural ethos embracing the equal humanity of all people. Yet my city, state, and nation declared it a punishable offense against the laws and mores for Blacks and whites "to travel, eat, defecate, wait, be buried, make love, play, relax and even speak together, except in the stereotyped context of master and servant interaction."[55]

My religious quest tried to relate the Christian doctrines preached in Black Church to the suffering, oppression, and exploitation of Black people in society. How could Christians who were white flatly and openly refuse to treat as fellow human beings Christians who had African ancestry? Was not the essence of the Gospel mandate a call to eradicate affliction, despair, and systems of injustice? Inasmuch as the Black Church expressed the inner ethical life of the people, was there any way to reconcile the inherent contradictions in Christianity as practiced by whites with the radical indictments of and challenges for social amelioration and economic development in the Black religious heritage? How long would the white church continue to be the ominous

symbol of white dominance, sanctioning and assimilating the propagation of racism in the mundane interests of the ruling group?

In the 1960s my quest for the integration of faith and ethics was influenced by scholars in various fields who surfaced the historical contributions of Afro-Americans that had been distorted and denied. Avidly I read the analysis exposing the assumptions and dogmas that made Blacks a negligible factor in the thought of the world. For more than three and a half centuries, a "conspiracy of silence" rendered invisible the outstanding contributions of Blacks to the culture of humankind. From cradle to grave the people in the United States were taught the alleged inferiority of Blacks.

When I turned specifically to theological ethics, I discovered the dominant ethical systems implied that the doing of Christian ethics in the Black community was either immoral or amoral. The cherished ethical ideas predicated upon the existence of freedom and a wide range of choices proved null and void in situations of oppression. The real-lived texture of Black life requires moral agency that may run contrary to the ethical boundaries of mainline Protestantism. Blacks may use action guides that have never been considered within the scope of traditional codes of faithful living. Racism, gender discrimination, and economic exploitation, as inherited, age-long complexes, require the Black community to create and cultivate values and virtues in their own terms so that they prevail against the odds with moral integrity.

For example, dominant ethics makes a virtue of qualities that lead to economic success—self-reliance, frugality, and industry. These qualities are based on an assumption that success is possible for anyone who tries. Developing confidence in one's own abilities, resources, and judgments amidst a careful use of money and goods—in order to exhibit assiduity in the pursuit of upward mobility—have proven to be positive values for many whites. But the oligarchic economic powers, and the consequent political power they generate, own and control capital and distribute credit in a manner detrimental to Blacks. As part of a legitimating system to justify the supposed inherent inferiority of Blacks, the values so central to white economic mobility prove to be ineffectual. Racism does not allow all Black women and Black men to work and save in order to develop a standard of living that is congruent with the American ideal.

Theory and analysis demonstrate that to embrace work as a "moral essential" means that Black women are still the last hired to do the work that white men, white women, and men of color refuse to do, and at a wage that men and white women refuse to accept. Black women, placed in jobs proven to be detrimental to their health, are doing the most menial, tedious, and by far the most underpaid work, if they manage to get a job at all.

Dominant ethics also assumes that a moral agent is to a considerable degree free and self-directing. Each person possesses self-determining power. For instance, one is free to choose whether or not she or he wants to suffer and make sacrifices as a principle of action or as a voluntary vocational pledge of crossbearing. In dominant ethics a person is free to make suffering a desirable moral norm. This is not so for Blacks. For the masses of Black people, suffering is the normal state of affairs. Mental anguish, physical abuse, and emotional agony are all part of Black people's daily lives. Due to the white supremacy and male superiority that pervade this society, Blacks and whites, women and men are forced to live with very different ranges of freedom. As long as the white-male experience continues to be established as the ethical norm, Black women, Black men, and others will suffer unequivocal oppression. The range of freedom has been restricted by those who cannot hear and will not hear voices expressing pleasure and pain, joy and rage as others experience them.

In the Black community, qualities that determine desirable ethical values of upright character and sound moral conduct must always take into account the circumstances, paradoxes, and dilemmas that constrict Blacks to the lowest rungs of the social, political, and economic hierarchy. Black existence is deliberately and openly controlled. . . . The vast majority of Blacks suffer every conceivable form of denigration. Their lives are named, defined and circumscribed by whites.

The moral wisdom of the Black community is extremely useful in defying oppressive rules or standards of "law and order" that degrade Blacks. It helps Blacks purge themselves of self-hate, thus asserting their own validity. But the ethical values of the Black community are not identical with the obligations and duties that Anglo-Protestant American society requires of its members. Nor can the ethical assumptions be the same, as long as powerful whites who control the wealth, the

systems, and the institutions in this society continue to perpetuate brutality and criminality against Blacks. . . .

Document 14. Delores S. Williams: Speaking Black Women's Tongue?

Delores S. Williams provides a provocative critique of white feminist theology in the following selection.[56] Her use of the term *demonarchy* as contrasted with patriarchy helps to illuminate the theological and sociopolitical differences between white and African American women's oppression. Her aim is exploring the implications of being a Black feminist mindful of dangers of co-optation and irrelevancy. She understands that a key task of the womanist theologian is to be accountable to the realities of Black Christian women's lives and the life of the Black community in general. Her most recent work, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993), explores the image and metaphor of the wilderness as a way to push current feminist and Black theology into deeper reflection on the nature of social oppression.

For feminist thinking, an important idea is that patriarchy is the major source of all women's oppression. However, this idea becomes limited and problematic when one attempts to use it to understand the Afro-American woman's *total* experience of oppression in North America.

In feminist literature, patriarchy is the power relation between men and women and between women and society's institutions controlled by men. White-American feminist Adrienne Rich describes it as:

> . . . the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.[57]

While Mary Daly, in *Beyond God the Father,* reveals how the patriarchal religions (e.g., Judaism and Christianity) reinforce women's oppression and validate male supremacy, her understanding of patriarchy apparently concurs with Rich's definition. It is not reductionist, I think, to suggest

that most feminist writing on the subject does support Rich's understanding of the meaning of patriarchy.[58]

However, a simple interpolation of Rich's definition reveals its limitation as far as black women are concerned. To be congruent with the Afro-American woman's experience of oppression in this country, patriarchy would have to be defined as:

> . . . the power of . . . [white men and white women]: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which [white men and white women]—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labor, determine what part [black women] shall or shall not play, and in which the [black female] is everywhere subsumed under the [white female] and white male.[59]

Thus defined, patriarchy loses its identity. It is no longer just the power of fathers, or men, to oppress women. It is also the power of a certain group of females to oppress other groups of females. This inclusion of a group of women as oppressors—an assessment that speaks the truth of the Afro-American woman's history in North America—renders the feminist patriarchal critique of society less valid as a tool for assessing black women's oppression *resulting from their relation to white-controlled American institutions.* Therefore, one cannot claim that patriarchy, as it is understood by feminists, is the major source of all women's oppression.

Another limitation of the feminist understanding of patriarchy is that it fails to place emphasis upon what appears to be a positive side of patriarchy with regard to the development of white-American women. It is also the operation of this positive side that indicates a clear distinction between white women's and black women's oppression.

White American patriarchy, in its institutional manifestations, affords many white female children and white female adults (as groups) the care, protection, and resources necessary for intellectual development and physical well-being.[60] White American patriarchy has thus provided white women with the education, skills, and support (and often financial resources) they need to get first chance at the jobs and opportunities for women resulting from the pressures exerted by the civil rights movements in America. White American patriarchy, in its private and institutional manifestations, also intends to support the life,

physical growth, intellectual development, and economic well-being of the female and male fruit of the white woman's womb—*When That Fruit Issues From Her Sexual Union With White Males.* From a black female perspective, then, it is possible to speak of *the productive patriarchal intent of white patriarchy* for the female and male fruit of the white woman's womb. And this productive patriarchal intent permeates the relation between white women (as a group) and the white-controlled institutions of American society.

However, the same institutions have no such productive intent for black women or for the fruit of black women's wombs (even if that fruit derived from sexual union between a black female and a white male).[61] Rather, these institutions intend the retardation of the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, economic, and physical growth of black women and the fruit of their wombs, male and female. This is partly demonstrated in the current operation of the white-controlled public school system in America. The black struggle for equality through integration into that system has exposed black children to a host of white male and white female teachers who daily undermine (often through ignorance of their own racism) the confidence, the intellectual stamina, the spirit, and the leadership development of black children. Convinced that black people are intellectually inferior to whites, many of these white teachers and school administrators "do not encourage black children to excel like they do white children," a black female student in my freshman English class once told me. "If you keep quiet, act nicely, and do a little work they will pass you," she said. "It doesn't matter that nobody taught you to read or write a theme." . . .

. . . The failure of white feminists to emphasize the *substantial difference* between their patriarchally-derived-privileged-oppression and black women's demonically-derived-annihilistic-oppression renders black women invisible in feminist thought and action. It is no wonder that in most feminist literature written by white-American women, the words "woman" and "women" signify only the white woman's experience. By failing to insert the word "white" before "woman" and "women," some feminists imperialistically take over the identity of those rendered invisible. Therefore, one can encounter instances in white feminist literature when feminists make appropriations from Afro-American culture without identifying the source of the appropriation and without admitting that American feminism has roots deep in black culture. . . .

. . . The implication of all the preceding discussion is that black women, *in their relation to white-controlled American institutions,* do not experience patriarchy.[62] It is necessary, then, for black women—when describing their own oppressed relation to white-controlled American institutions—to use new words, new language, and new ideas that fit their experience. These new words, language, and ideas will help black women develop an appropriate theoretical foundation for the ideology and political action needed to obtain the liberation of black women and the black family.[63]

Therefore, as a beginning, I suggest that there are at least two ways of institutional white-rule effecting the oppression of many American women. Certainly one of these is patriarchy as described by Adrienne Rich earlier in this paper. There is also the demonic way of institutional white-rule which controls black women's lives. This way can be named demonarchy.[64] Patriarchy, *in its white institutional form,* can also be understood as the systemic governance of white women's lives by white women's fathers, brothers, and sons using care, protection, and privilege as instruments of social control. Demonarchy can be understood as the demonic governance of black women's lives by white male and white female ruled systems using racism, violence, violation, retardation, and death as instruments of social control. Distinguished from individual violent acts stemming from psychological abnormalities on the part of the perpetrator, demonarchy is a traditional and collective expression of white government in relation to black women. It belongs to the realm of normalcy. It is informed by a state of consciousness that believes white women are superior to and more valuable than any woman of color and that white men are the most valuable and superior forms of life on earth. While sexism is a kind of women's oppression issuing from patriarchy, racist-gender oppression of black women issues from demonarchy. Black women cannot disjoin race and gender as they describe their oppression resulting from their relation to white-controlled American institutions. . . .

Document 15. Jacquelyn Grant: The Bible and Jesus in Womanist Tradition

Jacquelyn Grant explores the nature of the Bible and Jesus in the womanist tradition.[65] Her work takes great care to place Black women's

experience at the core of womanist theology. Her concern is to uncover the ways in which African American women of faith interpret the liberating message of the gospel to make sense out of race, gender, and class oppression. Her book, *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus* (1990), includes a thorough survey of white feminist Christology. She then offers a critique and expansion based on Black women's understanding of Jesus.

Theological investigation into the experiences of Christian Black women reveals that Black women considered the Bible to be a major source of religious validation in their lives. Though Black women's relationship with God preceded their introduction to the Bible, this Bible gave some content to their God-consciousness.[66] The source for Black women's understanding of God has been twofold: first, God's revelation directly to them, and secondly, God's revelation as witnessed in the Bible and as read and heard in the context of their experience. The understanding of God as creator, sustainer, comforter, and liberator took on life as they agonized over their pain, and celebrated the hope that as God delivered the Israelites, they would be delivered as well. The God of the Old and New Testament became real in the consciousness of oppressed Black women. Of the use of the Bible, Fannie Barrier Williams quite aptly said:

> Though the Bible was not an open book to the Negro before emancipation, thousands of the enslaved men and women of the Negro race learned more than was taught to them. Thousands of them realized the deeper meanings, the sweeter consolations and the spiritual awakenings that are part of the religious experiences of all Christians.[67]

In other words, though Black people in general and Black women in particular were politically impotent, religiously controlled, they were able to appropriate certain themes of the Bible which spoke to their reality. For example, Jarena Lee, a nineteenth century Black woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, constantly emphasized the theme "Life and Liberty" in her sermons which were always biblically based. This interplay of scripture and experience was exercised even more expressly by many other Black women. An ex-slave woman revealed that when her experience negated certain oppressive

interpretations of the Bible given by white preachers, she, through engaging the biblical message for herself, rejected them. Consequently, she also dismissed white preachers who distorted the message in order to maintain slavery. . . .

The truth which the Bible brought was undeniable, though perception of it was often distorted in order to support the monstrous system of oppression. Sarcastically responding to this tendency, Fannie Barrier Williams admonished, "do not open the Bible too wide." Biblical interpretation, realized Williams, a non-theologically trained person, had at its basis the prior agenda of white America. She therefore argued:

> Religion, like every other force in America, was first used as an instrument and servant of slavery. All attempts to Christianize the negro were limited by the important fact that he was property of valuable and peculiar sort, and that the property value must not be disturbed, even if his soul were lost. If Christianity could make the negro docile, domestic and less an independent and fighting savage, let it be preached to that extent and no further.[68]

Such false, pernicious, demoralizing gospel could only be preached if the Bible was not opened wide enough, lest one sees the liberating message of Jesus as summarized in Luke 4:18. The Bible must be read and interpreted in the light of Black women's own oppression and God's revelation within that context. Womanists must, like Sojourner, "compare the teachings of the Bible with the witness" in them.[69]

To do Womanist theology, then, we must read and hear the Bible and engage it within the context of our own experience. This is the only way that it can make sense to people who are oppressed. Black women of the past did not hesitate in doing this and we must do no less. . . .

. . . Having opened the Bible wider than many White people, Black people, in general, and Black women in particular, found a Jesus who they could claim, and whose claim for them was one of affirmation of dignity and self-respect.

In the experience of Black people, Jesus was "all things."[70] Chief among these however was the belief in Jesus as the divine co-sufferer, who empowers them in situations of oppression. For Christian Black women in the past, Jesus was their central frame of reference. They

identified with Jesus because they believed that Jesus identified with them. As Jesus was persecuted and made to suffer undeservedly, so were they. His suffering culminated in the crucifixion. Their crucifixion included rapes, and husbands being castrated (literally and metaphorically), babies being sold, and other cruel and often murderous treatments. But Jesus' suffering was not the suffering of a mere human, for Jesus was understood to be God incarnate. As Harold Carter observed of Black prayers in general, there was no difference made between the persons of the trinity, Jesus, God, or the Holy Spirit. All of these proper names for God were used interchangeably in prayer language. Thus, Jesus was the one who speaks the world into creation. He was the power behind the Church.[71] Black women's affirmation of Jesus as God meant that White people were not God. . . .

Document 16. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes: Afrocentric Appropriation of the Bible

The work of sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes represents the best of the interdisciplinary enterprise of womanist thought. An expert on the Sanctified Church (Black Holiness and Pentecostal churches), Gilkes explores how the Bible was an important interpretative tool for Africans as they developed a distinctive Afro-Christian tradition.[72] In the following excerpt, Gilkes looks at the King James Bible as an Afrocentric matrix as she develops the theme "mother to the motherless, father to the fatherless."

. . . An Afrocentric reading of the Bible is a reading that incorporates the events that are central to the black experience and affirms the dignity of the African personality in the face of the forces of degradation; such a reading rejects the use of Bible as an apology for oppression and it is quick to point out the categorical inclusion of Africans. This inclusion becomes the basis upon which the text can be expanded upon and augmented to include the range of experiences that are peculiarly African and African-American and yet affirm the universality of the good news. Through a variety of folktexts, the Afrocentric reading captures the multivalent dimensions of the oppression. Ultimately an Afrocentric reading of the Bible is an important contribution to an ever

expanding hermeneutic of suspicion growing out of many theologies of liberation and to a hermeneutic of affirmation and of creative actualization that have roots in the preaching traditions of black churches.

The problems of powerlessness and injustice are central themes in the Bible. The category "fatherless" is extremely large and God as "father to the fatherless" is reinforced in the Anglican prayer tradition, something the Africans and their descendants borrowed in spite of their rejection of the worship tradition. The genius of this Afrocentric reading of the Bible is its recognition of the central issues of powerlessness, justice, and theodicy in a context where the dominant "canon within the canon" did not. Hanks[73] described his response when he noted this omission in the dominant exegetical tradition. He reflected "Imagine my shock when I consulted work after work of First World biblical erudition . . . and found almost nothing! My initial reaction was one of perplexity, frustration, and indignation." The Afrocentric reading discerned what Hanks[74] discovered: that "oppression [is] *a basic structural category of biblical theology.*"

Biblical definitions of oppression embraced the slaves' experience. The Bible identified multiple "forms and methods of oppression." Tamez,[75] summarizing this biblical perspective, writes:

> The oppressors are thieves and murderers, but their ultimate purpose is not to kill or impoverish the oppressed. Their primary objective is to increase their wealth at whatever cost. The impoverishment and death of the oppressed are a secondary consequence. There are two levels of oppression: the international and the national. Black people experienced both and they observed this in their close relationship with Native peoples in the South. At the international level that oppression described in the Bible consists of "the enslavement and exploitation of . . . workers, . . . genocide, [ideologies and] myths of idleness, . . . deceitful concessions, [crushing violent force], . . . plunder and slaughter, . . . the imposition of tribute, . . . and exile."[76]

Slaves knew they were exploited workers. They experienced the genocidal dimensions through the murders and tortures of slavery and the Middle Passage. They were victimized by the myths of idleness embedded in such stereotypes as Sambo.[77] Story after story of slaves cheated out of their opportunity to buy their own or their family members'

freedom spoke to the problem of deceitful concessions. The excessively brutal responses to slave revolts and the decades of post-bellum terror reinforced biblical images of plunder and slaughter. Even the problem of exile—the legal and customary inability to live as free persons in slave areas—was prominent in slave consciousness. Manumission could mean the loss of family and community. Women's low rates of escape reflect these constraints of family and community.

Even the "national" dimensions of biblical oppression, "exploitation of workers, . . . fraud, and . . . [violence], murder," were evident in the black experience. The Bible also counseled against lending systems or "usury" that perpetuated an oppressed state and southern sharecroppers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had no trouble recognizing the biblical opposition to their plight. The Bible also cited "sexual violation of women" as one of the central "methods" of oppression. The disparity of strength was so great that rape was sometimes imaged as a form of murder.[78]

In their reading of Psalm 68 and by extension the other psalms that speak directly of the "poor," the "fatherless," the "widow," "the weak," and the "captive," slaves understood that they were poor and in need of liberation. In recognizing their "fatherlessness" black people grappled with their "natal alienation" or "social death."[79] Their humanity was legally stripped from them and their only realistic challenge was moral and religious in a society where ideologies of freedom and citizenship abounded. Psalm 68 as part of their Afrocentric reading became a promise of ultimate empowerment. As the biblical "fatherless" and therefore God's people, they were endowed with rights and privileges. Their emphasis on "Jubilee" as an aspect of liberation and freedom perceived that even in biblical slavery, a challenge existed to the injustice they experienced. The Bible offered a vision of economic equity and citizenship. Redemption or salvation incorporated economic and political empowerment and a restoration to civil status.

Slaves' view of themselves as motherless addressed the powerlessness of their family and community systems. That view recognized the devastating assault on women within the system of racial oppression. Black men wrote most of the slave narratives that account for the suffering of women, usually their mothers or other relatives. They lamented the neglect that stemmed from slave women's exploitation as nurses and

caretakers of white children. They described the pervasive violence and sexual abuse in the slave system. The physical and ideological assaults on black mothers were major manifestations of cultural humiliation. The powerlessness of women to withstand sexual victimization was an emblem of group oppression.

By connecting motherlessness and fatherlessness, the Afro-Christian tradition provided a comprehensive portrait of powerlessness. It was a civil, economic, political, and cultural problem combined. Fatherlessness linked with motherlessness apprehended the particularities of the black situation. The theological perspective in the Afrocentric reading assesses the morality of oppression, particularly the morality of the oppressors themselves. Intuitively, this Afrocentric approach recognized what Tamez describes as a basic characteristic of oppressors: "The oppressors are rich and influential people . . . ; their basic concern is to accumulate wealth. They . . . are idolaters who follow false gods that can lend an aura of legitimacy to their actions. . . ."[80] Since Psalm 68 spoke of the necessity for all to turn to God, oppressors were brought under its judgment. In opposition to the oppressors' attempts to ideologize the Bible, this reading upheld the Bible's original judgment of power and oppression.