

AFRICAN AMERICAN
THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

A Reader

Peter J. Paris, Editor
with Julius Crump

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Library of Theological Ethics

General Editors' Introduction

The field of theological ethics possesses in its literature an abundant inheritance concerning religious convictions and the moral life, critical issues, methods, and moral problems. The Library of Theological Ethics is designed to present a selection of important texts that would otherwise be unavailable for scholarly purposes and classroom use. The series engages the question of what it means to think theologically and ethically. It is offered in the conviction that sustained dialogue with our predecessors serves the interests of responsible contemporary reflection. Our more immediate aim in offering it, however, is to enable scholars and teachers to make more extensive use of classic texts as they train new generations of theologians, ethicists, and ministers.

The volumes included in the library comprise a variety of types. Some make available English-language texts and translations that have fallen out of print; others present new translations of texts previously unavailable in English. Still others offer anthologies or collections of significant statements about problems and themes of special importance. We hope that each volume will encourage contemporary theological ethicists to remain in conversation with the rich and diverse heritage of their discipline.

ROBIN LOVIN
DOUGLAS F. OTTATI
WILLIAM SCHWEIKER

Preface and Acknowledgments

The idea for this book emerged many years ago when the general editors of the Library of Theological Ethics (LTE) series, namely Robin W. Lovin, Douglas F. Ottati, and William Schweiker, expressed interest in publishing a text on African American theological ethics. After considerable conversation with many colleagues, I decided that a text containing historical and contemporary resources would be helpful to teachers if it presented African Americans as agents in defining, analyzing, and prescribing solutions to the social problems they confronted. It was not a surprise to learn, however, that varying forms of racial oppression constituted the paramount social problem that African Americans have faced throughout their history. Thus, this book contains a selection of significant voices in that struggle, and it is organized in accordance with the various types of opposition they waged in their quests for social justice.

A number of people have been involved in the production of this work. No one believed in its value more than the late Stephanie Egnotovich, the executive editor whose sudden death I continue to mourn. The several meetings I had with her in the last year of her life were always pleasant, perceptive, and encouraging. Subsequent work with the acquisitions editor Jana Reiss was also a very satisfying experience as she supervised the work of securing permissions. In that process, my step-daughter Allison Daniels also provided much help, for which I am grateful. But most of the tedious work in securing permissions and proofing scanned materials was done by Julius Crump, a PhD student at the University of Chicago Divinity School. I am most grateful to him and to his advisor, William Schweiker, who enabled the arrangement. This book would not have been completed without their significant input.

I would also like to thank Cedric Rucker, my research assistant during the year I spent as a visiting professor at Harvard University Divinity School. He undertook the initial task of scanning many of the works in this volume. Further still, I am also grateful to current Executive Editor, Robert A. Ratcliff, and

Director of Production, Julie Tonini, for their excellent work in guiding this book through its final stages of production.

A final word of thanks is reserved for my wife, Adrienne Daniels Paris, whose continuing love and support mean more to me than words can express.

PETER J. PARIS
MIDDLETOWN, DELAWARE
JUNE, 2015

Introduction

The substance of this book evokes the importance of two significant temporal dimensions of the African American experience: namely, memory of the past and hope for the future. Both of those terms capture the historical reality wherein an oppressed people developed their thought and ways of responding to their tragic plight. Accordingly, their theologies and ethics emerged in that cruel and brutal past where their lives were sustained by an undying hope enlivened by their religious imagination.

Brought to these American shores involuntarily four hundred years ago, the suffering of these African people was indescribable. Tens of thousands perished during the so-called middle passage, but many survived as a testimony to the resiliency of the human spirit and its trust in a divine power as the source of abiding hope. Memory of the past coupled with hope for the future constituted the polarities of their temporal experience that came together in every present moment of their lives. As each day's experience was a struggle for survival in the midst of incredible odds, they used all their meager resources, including their religion and morality, in pursuit of that one practical goal. The quality of their endeavors was enhanced by their capacity for creative response. Though badly bruised and broken by their social condition, they were not destroyed.

Contrary to the thought of many observers, their reliance on the help of divine forces did not imply a spirit of passivity. Rather, the practical goal of survival required a partnership between human endeavor and spiritual forces. These Africans had brought that discernment with them through the "middle passage" and eventually integrated its African content with the new substance that they discovered and reshaped in this alien land. The result has been the birth of a hybrid religion and morality known as African American theology and ethics. Both were developed contextually: that is to say, African American theology and African American ethics emerged out of their history of suffering and struggle over a long period of time. The trauma of those experiences helped to strengthen

them in their daily endeavors to combat those who denied them their humanity. Alas, the recognition of the value of their religious thought and practice as subjects for academic study and research also involved a struggle.

Toward the end of the turbulent 1960s, a few seminaries and colleges in the United States began offering courses for the first time on a subject that was variously titled: Black Religion in America, The Black Church in America, The Black Religious Experience, to name only a few.¹ In each case the new offerings resulted from the demands of black students in predominantly white colleges, universities, and seminaries for a curriculum that would recognize the historical struggles and accomplishments of black Americans who built churches that have endured for over two centuries. Since there were few academic publications on black religion at that time, and since none of the pioneer teachers had ever had a formal course on the subject, they diligently mined the libraries for source materials only to discover that most of the relevant books² were out of print. Yet as soon as their demands became known, new editions of those nearly forgotten materials were quickly published.

Those new courses signaled the beginning of a movement for curricular change in theological and religious studies: a movement that was generated by the demand that two centuries of African American religious history be acknowledged as worthy of academic study, teaching, research, and publications. Those pressures coincided with the nascent discourse about the controversial phenomenon called black theology.³

In his first published book, James H. Cone, the progenitor of that new theological genre, leveled a major attack against the classical tradition of theological studies. In brief, he declared that that tradition was guilty of epistemological hegemony as seen by its ignorance, distortion, and devaluation of the religious traditions of oppressed African Americans. Both the challenges and proposed correctives of the black theology advocates received moral support and appreciation from the American Academy of Religion, which approved the formation of a program unit at its annual meetings titled Afro-American Religious History⁴ that continues to exist up to the present day. In that same year the Society for

1. Often the term "Afro-American" was used as a synonym for "black."

2. A partial list of those books included the following: W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903); Mark Miles Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: The American Historical Society, 1953); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933); Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*, (n.p.: Chapman and Grimes, Inc., 1938); Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Pierce and Smith, 1949); and Carter G. Woodson, *History of the Negro Church* (Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, 1921). It is important to note that none of the bibliographies in those early years included any texts by women.

3. James H. Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), appeared in the same year that these courses were being offered for the first time.

4. This program unit was chaired for many years by the late Professor James Melville Washington, one of James Cone's colleagues at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

the Study of Black Religion⁵ (SSBR-1970) was organized as a racially separate space aimed at nurturing, supporting, and celebrating the development of black religious scholarship. Most important, the members of the SSBR, inspired by the groundbreaking work of James Cone, focused their energy on developing a new methodological approach to the study of black religion that would do justice to its history and ongoing significance. Clearly, that organization never intended to be an alternative to the American Academy of Religion but rather a locus in which black scholars could strengthen one another for more effective participation within the larger academic academies.

These combined endeavors soon yielded astounding results as evidenced by the gradual increase of African Americans in PhD programs and their consequent appointments to the faculties of seminaries, divinity schools, colleges, and universities. Equally important, by the early 1980s African American women pursuing PhD studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York City began raising their voices in criticism of black male and white feminist theologies for rendering them invisible. Drawing on the novelist Alice Walker's definition of the term "womanist," these women soon gave birth to what they called "womanist studies"⁶ in which they determined to study religion from the perspective of African American women's experience.

Increasing numbers of African Americans were soon recognized for their creative productivity in the fields of biblical studies, history, homiletics, theology, ethics, Christian education, pastoral care, and sociology of religion. Suffice it to say that those accomplishments along with the academic works of several other racial and ethnic minorities in the profession eventually resulted in a revolutionary change in the academic study of religion. Numerous diverse voices, long excluded from the mainstream of academic discourse, began the process of making their imprint on religious scholarship by challenging the cultural hegemony within the academy that had excluded them from participation for such a long time.

The aim of this book is to provide a collection of resources that depict a broad range of theological and ethical reasoning that African Americans developed during two centuries of slavery, a subsequent century of racial segregation and

5. One of the principal organizers and the first elected president of The Society for the Study of Black Religion was C. Shelby Rooks, who was at that time the executive director of the Fund for Theological Education, which has continued to provide financial support for African Americans and others in theological education.

6. Two of the earliest writings along these lines were the following: Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History (1966-1979)*, edited by Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982), 418-33 and Delores S. Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," in the *Journal of Religious Thought*, 43, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1986), 42-58. Three of the earliest books on the subject were published by the following: Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988); Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989); and Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (New York: Maryknoll, 1993).

discrimination, and another half century of continuing inequalities of opportunity and achievement.

Ever since the year 1619 when a small group of Africans were sold into slavery from a Dutch man-of-war in Jamestown, Virginia, America has been a hostile environment for people of African descent. Throughout the colonial period and the first century of this nation's independence, Africans were defined by both popular opinion and the Constitution itself as only partially human. Hence, they were viewed as lacking the natural capacity for equal participation in the nation's political, social, and religious life. The most insidious implication of this definition of Africans as partially human was their tacit removal from the moral realm. Thus, their oppressors felt themselves free from both law and conscience to treat them with impunity. The doctrine of white superiority that reined over all such anthropological discourse has long endured as the first principle of racial reasoning both here and elsewhere. Despite the decreasing numbers of true believers and its legal demise, its spirit has not yet vanished completely from our public domain. Both then and now, its embrace implied the natural inferiority of all African peoples and also, consequently, justified slavery and all subsequent societal practices of racial segregation, discrimination, disrespect, and inequality. Thus Part 1 of this book focuses attention on the signature African American response to that primary anthropological doctrine of white racism.

Although this book does not contain a comprehensive assemblage of African American religious arguments against racial oppression, it does include representative examples of most of them. Since racial oppression assumed many forms over the centuries, African American responses did likewise. Thus, this book is organized in accordance with four organizing practical principles: (1) opposing the doctrine of white supremacy, (2) opposing slavery, (3) opposing racial segregation, and (4) opposing racial discrimination. The book then devotes part 5 to African American religious creativity and part 6 to African American themes and perspectives. An apt conclusion for the book is a poem by James Weldon Johnson on memory and hope, which, since 1919, African Americans have embraced as their national anthem because it expresses in poetic form an overview of the peoples' sufferings and hopes.

Each of the above four organizing principles emerged during a period in black history that was characterized by a dominant form of racial oppression. Parts 5 and 6 comprise respectively overviews of selected African American creative contributions to America's religious culture and selected themes and perspectives with which to guide present-day study and research. Teachers of African American theology and ethics may wish to read these chapters first as contemporary views of the history, methodological issues, and ongoing challenges.

Moreover, it is important to note that African American theological ethics is not an abstract theoretical enterprise. Rather, it is a form of inquiry that is closely related to African American studies in history and sociology both of which either imply or reveal a normative bias for racial justice. Prominent examples of this

claim are seen in the works of such scholars as W. E. B. DuBois, Charles S. Johnson, Rayford W. Logan, Benjamin E. Mays, Joseph W. Nicholson, Miles Mark Fisher, and others.

The descriptive and analytical works in this volume were chosen from those of early to mid-twentieth century writers who, along with others, have comprised an unofficial canon for African American religious studies. Yet a growing number of contemporary scholars regularly debate that claim.

Beginning with Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, many ancestral black religious leaders like Peter Williams, Nathaniel Paul, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, Daniel Payne, David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet, Alexander Crummell, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett fully embraced a common historical narrative that highlighted the moral evil of slavery and racial segregation on the one hand and the long struggle of blacks and their allies for freedom on the other hand. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century that narrative was promulgated by The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and most of the black churches as an integrationist model aimed at the goal of first class citizenship for all African Americans. Most important, it was viewed as wholly compatible with the principles of the United States Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Christian gospel.

Challenged by the black power movement of the 1960s and the subsequent birth of black studies programs, James H. Cone undertook the valiant endeavor of synthesizing the integrationist and black nationalist traditions in his nascent black theology project. Since black America's most beloved martyrs, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, had embodied racial integration and black nationalism respectively, a national public debate ensued concerning the political and cultural value of each.

Inspired by the political independence movements throughout Africa, both the integrationists and nationalists quickly nurtured and created international connections that steadily enabled more expansive spheres of mutual support and enrichment for all concerned.

Since space in this volume does not permit more examples of the nationalist tradition, we recommend that students and teachers augment these readings with selections from the writings of Malcolm X (1925–1965) and Stokely Carmichael (1941–1998). It is an interesting fact that the two major Pan-Africanists of the twentieth century, Stokely Carmichael and W. E. B. DuBois, emigrated to Guinea and Ghana respectively, where they died and are entombed.

Finally, it is important to note that the responses of African Americans to their oppression have ranged along a continuum from adaptation to wholesale withdrawal from the United States.⁷ In between those two extremes we discover

7. For a full discussion of these four types of responses, see the introduction to the second edition of my book, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 15–28.

differing types of actions aimed at social change via racial self-development, legitimate protest, legislation, insurrection, and emigration. Needless to say, every response required the necessary societal conditions that made it permissible. The common thread that runs through all the various responses, however, is some specific form of resistance to racial oppression and inequality. Clearly, those forms of reasoned resistance were rich in their diversity during every period of African American history.

Some may contend that African Americans did not always resist their oppression but rather accommodated themselves to it. I contend that such a viewpoint is erroneous because accommodation implies adapting to the societal conditions without affirming those conditions. In other words, adaptation means that one does not trespass in the restricted zones but, instead, demonstrates in one's segregated place the contrary implied by the restriction. For example, the view that African Americans were incapable of classical learning was contradicted by their academic achievements in segregated black colleges. Also, the view that African Americans were incapable of founding and managing institutions was contradicted by the achievements of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute as well as the founding, growth, and endurance of countless black religious institutions. Similarly, a brief glance of black creative achievements in the arts, music, sports, and entertainment under the conditions of their racially segregated world reveals a qualitative deficit that the larger society has suffered by denying a race of people the opportunity to participate. Thus, none should contend that adapting to racism implies affirming it as the deleterious metaphor "Uncle Tom" would imply.

Sadly, at the beginning of this republic, the United States proudly presented itself as the locus for a unique experiment in democracy. Yet the Constitution that the states ratified provided full citizenship rights only to white male property owners. Ironically, it extended the transatlantic slave trade for another twenty years, defined African people as three-fifths human for the sake of voting, and excluded them (along with all women and non-property-owning men) from equal participation in the new democracy. From that time onward, each of the excluded groups has striven to expand the nation's civic laws and practices in order to become included as bona fide citizens with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto. Thus, their struggles were strikingly similar to those of the colonists who chose to wage a war for their political independence and the right to determine their own destiny in this new world. In contrast to the colonists, however, these subsequent groups were bent on the expansion of democracy rather than its restriction, and that has constituted their indelible contribution to this nation's unfinished legacy.