

African American Theology

African American Theology

AN INTRODUCTION

Frederick L. Ware

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

© 2016 Frederick L. Ware

Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Westminster John Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396. Or contact us online at www.wjkbooks.com.

The publisher and the author gratefully acknowledge reuse of the author's following essays:

"Black Theology," taken from *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*, edited by William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. Copyright © 2008 by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515, USA. www.ivpress.com.

"Methodologies of African American Theology," taken from *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, edited by Anthony Pinn and Katie Cannon. Copyright © 2014 by Oxford University Press. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, USA (www.oup.com).

"Toward an Alternative Engagement of Black Theology with Modern Science," taken from *Black Theology: An International Journal*. Copyright © 2011.

Book design by Drew Stevens
Cover design by Allison Taylor

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ware, Frederick L., 1961–
African American theology : an introduction / Frederick L. Ware.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-664-23950-3 (alk. paper)
1. Black theology. I. Title.
BT82.7.W36 2016
230.089'96073—dc23

2015034507

♻️ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Most Westminster John Knox Press books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. For more information, please e-mail SpecialSales@wjkbooks.com.

In memory of
my mother,
Dannie Vee Benson (1926–2009)

Contents

Preface	xi
Introduction	1
Defining African American Theology	3
<i>Loci Theologici</i> as Modern Genre of Systematic Theology	5
Configuration of Loci for African American Theology	11
Freedom as an Overarching Theme	12
Design of the Book's Parts and Chapters	17
PART 1 HISTORY	
1. History and Historical Study	21
The Importance of History and Historical Studies in Theology	22
The Origins of African American Theology	24
Contemporary Black Theology and Womanist Theology	27
Contrasting Histories and Characterizations of African American Theology	29
Black History and Critical Historiography	31
PART 2 METHODOLOGY	
2. Sources	41
Customary Sources of Theology	41
Black Religion as Principal Subject Matter	44
Black Religion and the Depth of Black Culture	47
Criteria for the Selection of Sources	49
Mining for Black Religion in Ethnographic Study, Libraries, and Archives	51
3. Methods	57
The Method of Correlation	57
Deep Symbols and Recurring Themes	61

Sources and Resources	65
Paradigms in Contemporary Black and Womanist Theologies	67
Black Experience and the Norm of Freedom	70
4. Epistemology	73
Faith, Revelation, and Reason	74
Philosophical Traditions in African American Theology	77
The Sociology and Production of Knowledge	85
Stages of Disciplinary Development	86
PART 3 THEMES AND ISSUES	
5. God	91
The Negro's God	91
Origins of African American Monotheism	93
The Existence and Attributes of God	94
Trinitarianism and Oneness	96
God's Work in the World and Solidarity with the Oppressed	98
The Quest for God beyond God	101
The Gift of God's Revelation in the Black Experience	104
6. Human Being	107
Body-Soul Dualism in the Black Experience	108
Blackness and the Image of God	111
Blackness as a "Deep" Symbol	111
Human Being and Freedom	114
Conversion and Personhood	117
7. Religious Experience	121
The Birth of "Soul-Stuff"	122
Conversion, Catharsis, and Transformation	124
The Spirit and the "Shout"	126
Emotion and Intellect	127
8. Suffering	131
Critique and Defense of Redemptive Suffering	132
Theodicy and Black Suffering	136
Faith that Emerges alongside Suffering	138

9. Salvation	141
Personal and Social Manifestations of Sin	141
Jesus Christ and Salvation	144
Metaphors and Models of Salvation	146
Salvation and Community	154
10. Moral Life and Community	157
Black Solidarity and Community	158
The Church as Community and Moral Conscience	162
The Ethics of Freedom in Church and Society	165
Violence in the Struggle for Liberation	168
11. Hope	171
Hope as Object and Longing	172
Utopian and Eschatological Vision	172
Traditions of Black Millennialism	174
Heaven and the Afterlife	177
Eschatology and Verification of Religious Beliefs	178
12. Nature and Science	181
People of Color and the Dialogue on Science and Religion	182
Ways of Relating Science and Religion	183
Science in Theological Education	187
Science and the Humanity of Black People	188
African American Theologies of Nature	191
African American Theology's Engagement with Modern Science	194
13. Christian Diversity and Religious Pluralism	197
Black Christian Ecumenism	198
The Black Church Impacted by Migration and Immigration	200
Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Dialogue	202
The Commencement of Dialogue	204
Notes	207
Select Bibliography	227
Name Index	239
Subject Index	243

Preface

My experience as a student and now as a teacher parallels shifting perceptions of African American theology in the last thirty-two years. In the spring semester of 1984, while I was an undergraduate student in philosophy at Memphis State University (now the University of Memphis), I was introduced to black theology by Otis Clayton. Otis, a recent seminary graduate, was enrolled in the master's program in philosophy. We talked often and at length before and after our course in the philosophy of religion. Otis's command of the literature and coherent summaries of the debates in black theology convinced me that black theology was a field of study that I needed to know. At this same time, I was learning about black philosophy but was more intrigued with black theology because I was undertaking studies in philosophy in preparation for my later theological studies. For me, black theology seemed to deal with the economic, social, and political situation of black people in a sustained way that I had not earlier witnessed in the church. Though leaders in the church expressed deep concern and were involved in various types of ministries to address the condition of black people, they had not developed a level and intensity of theological reflection comparable to their passionate activism. While preparing this book, as fate would have it, I had the privilege, after nearly ten years since our last conversation, to speak again with Otis. By his present questions and tone, I sense his unease with recent works in black theology, especially those that purport to do theology without a professed commitment to fundamental Christian beliefs.

In spite of several notable figures leading in contemporary black and womanist theology, no one today actually masters the field. In the 1980s, when I was in college and a divinity student, I read and compiled notes on every book available on black theology and womanist theology. At that time, there was a small, manageable corpus of literature. For a while, it was possible to stay current. Now it is questionable as to whether anyone is able to read every book and article at the rate they are being published today. Some books and articles may

fall into similar patterns of methodology. Still other books and articles seem to be aimed toward new trajectories. Further complicating the matter is the fact there is not always an obvious connection between the publications.

Consequently, this book in no way purports to be a comprehensive study covering every publication in African American theology. More to the truth, the book represents my reading over the last thirty years and my teaching for the past sixteen years. Though my reading is extensive, I have been selective about which publications in black and womanist theology to include for this book. This is not an admission of personal failure or professional neglect but rather a recognition of the abundant corpus of literature now available to persons who wish to explore the field of African American theology as well as a word of caution for any persons who claim immodestly to have mastery of the entire field. As the subtitle of the book implies, and the best that I am able to do, the book provides a manageable source for persons unfamiliar with the field to begin their study and a stimulus for further conversation among persons who have experimented, as I have, in the field for a considerable length of time.

Over the years the types of questions and concerns voiced by my students have motivated me to think very deeply about the structure of African American theology. Throughout my teaching African American theology, the questions and concerns by students in various settings and at various offerings of the course seem always to be the same. Their questions are rarely about content, about the literature. Their questions have been mostly about the connection of African American theology, in its forms of black theology or womanist theology, to mainstream traditions of Christian theology and the broad range of issues, in addition to liberation, that concern black Christians.

In the past sixteen years, I have offered the course in African American theology a total of eight times, half of them under the title “Black Theology” and the other half under the title “African American Theology.” During the 2012–13 academic year, I had the privilege to offer the course to students in two different settings, one at Howard University School of Divinity (HUSD) and the other at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (LTSP). Here I list the names of the students enrolled in my African American theology courses offered during the 2012–13 academic year: Agnes Smith Brown, Kyra Brown, Constance Cotton, Patricia El, Dedra Florence-Johnson, Timothy Gavin, Phillip Harris, Timothy Hearn, Gail Hicks, Yvonne Lembo, Linda Manson,

Meagan McLeod, Wanda Pate, Michelle Pinkney, Marcia Price, Diane Pryor, Barbara Satchell, Edmond Sewoul, Candace Strand, Robin Thornhill, Stephanie Wooten, and Lisa Younger. Though students in each course that I have offered have always been engaging, this group of scholars named above were most instrumental in thinking through with me several of the topics covered in this introduction to African American theology.

I interpret my experience and the general shifts in the perceptions of African American theology—most certainly as I have observed them in my students' quest for a conception of blackness and sense of community beyond existing polarized classifications in American society—as a movement from the “politics of identity” to the “politics of truth.” On the one hand, the politics of identity is a trend in the humanities, inclusive of religious and theological studies, that focuses on the social locations and political leanings of scholars and the populations they study. The politics of identity indicates the academy's poor adaptation to the social protests of minorities and women and the slow increase of these underrepresented groups in the student bodies and faculties of American colleges and universities. The focus on the various social locations for theological reflection has enriched religious and theological studies; yet with the increasing fixation on social identity, scholars rarely engage in conversations about the principal nature of their disciplines and the meaning of life for all humankind. On the other hand, the politics of truth is a quest for the best possible experience of life in universal community. It is a quest that more scholars are willing to take, desiring to gain a view of human identity and issues of social justice in the widest possible context, global or cosmic, where efforts to understand who we are as human beings and to find solutions to our social problems are linked to the question of humanity's place in the universe. As a scholar leaning toward a politics of truth, my blackness as well as other aspects of my identity contributes to my awareness of self. This sense of self is not, for me, an end in itself but rather a window to peer into a deeper sense of my life, where the various disparate parts of my personhood are united and my internal wholeness is paired with the harmony of all that is. There is no part of me that I wish to deny. And yet there is no single part of me that alone defines me. My aim is to be “human,” to live and to live well as the creature that I am.

Discussion about the big questions and perennial issues always begins from some location. Howard Thurman said that in order for a person to be everywhere, they must first be somewhere. African American

theology represents one among several starting points for this large and important conversation among human beings. My study of theology is ethnic-specific, but not in an exclusive way. I intend that my study of African American theology will contribute to reflection about the discipline of theology and the religious dimensions of human existence.

In addition to the stimulus to my thinking provided by my students, other persons have been supportive of my work. To them I am thankful. In 2009, I began conversations with Donald McKim, at Westminster John Knox Press, about writing a book on African American theology. Before moving into another position with the press, Don had arranged anonymous reviews of my book proposal. These reviews helped me gain better clarity on the contribution that my project may make to the discipline of African American theology. Robert Ratcliff, who assumed the role of editor, has been very supportive and patient as I worked, sometimes at snail's pace, on the book project. My research assistants Linwood Blizzard and Rhonda Rhea were very thorough in their research. Any omissions of materials from the book are attributable to my choices. I am thankful to the Howard University librarians Carrie Hackney and Ida Jones for working closely with Linwood and Rhonda. Quintin Robertson, Director of the Urban Theological Institute, and Dean Jayakiran Sebastian extended to me the invitation to engage a wonderful group of students at the Lutheran Theological Seminary. A sabbatical leave provided by the Office of the Provost of Howard University provided the financial support I needed in order to give sustained and uninterrupted attention to the book project. I benefited greatly from many conversations with my Howard colleagues Kenyatta Gilbert and Renee Harrison about my project, from start to finish, as well as our shared concerns on various matters.

My family has always affirmed me in every project that I have undertaken. My daughter Kayla, a senior in college, often reminded me about the need for textbooks to be interesting for students like her who for the first time would be learning about African American theology. My daughter Megan, a sophomore in college and a promising researcher, devoted many hours to reviewing with me the numerous primary sources unearthed in my research. My wife, Sheila, has always been a patient listener and thoughtful interlocutor, accompanying me along my musings and asking questions of the kind to encourage me to think seriously and deeply about how to express my ideas in words understandable to nonexperts. My mother, Dannie Vee Benson, even several years after passing, remains with me in spirit, along with other

members of our family, providing inspiration for many of our personal and professional accomplishments.

Reverend Arnor S. Davis, an alumnus of HUSD, passed away in August 2013. I seem now to hear his words more than ever before. He would often say, “Tell me something that I do not know. Explain to me why I should be interested and how it matters for the church.” I hope that a book of this kind answers his and other readers’ queries.

Introduction

In the United States, religion and ethnicity represent spaces for creativity and opportunity in the development of American culture by virtue of the unique political structure of the United States. In the language of economics, religion in the United States is an unregulated, free market.¹ The constitutional separation of church and state has allowed individuals and groups freedom in the area of religion to develop numerous belief systems and organizations for furthering their shared aims and convictions. Over the course of American history, certain religious traditions have become “mainstream,” that is, widely regarded as acceptable expressions of religion. Still other religious traditions run counter to or, in some instances, complement the mainstream traditions. In either case, religion thrives through emphasis on personal religious experience and voluntary association between persons who share similar experiences and convictions.

Before the U.S. Constitution was drafted, this form of religion, emphasizing personal experience and initiative, took shape in what has been termed the Great Awakening, an important event not only in American history but also in African American history. In the fervor of revival, anyone could take the title of minister on the basis of one’s inner sense of calling, which may or may not be affirmed by an existing religious organization. All persons were believed to be equal before God and granted the same privilege by the Holy Spirit to participate in religious life and ministry. “The revivalism of the Great Awakening,

spread over time and space by evangelical preachers, created the conditions for large-scale conversion of [African American] slaves.”² Jonathan Edwards and other revival preachers described the Awakening as the “dawning of a new day” and the conversion of African Americans as “showers of grace” preceding the “glorious times” of the millennium.³ For Edwards, the revivals were a sign of the millennium, which was starting in America and would spread to other parts of the world. Revival preaching, during and after the Revolutionary War, blended with the rhetoric of patriotism to produce an association of God’s work in history with politics and government. In the zeal of evangelical churches (i.e., Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist) to spread the gospel, strong positions were taken against slavery and visions were cast for the reform of society. The evangelical churches’ challenge of the existing social order and African Americans’ own adverse experience of racism and oppression provoked African Americans to propose alternative interpretations of the American nation and its mission. For African Americans, slave and free, and even many white Americans, slavery violated the fundamental principle of the American Revolution, as stated in the Declaration of Independence, that all persons are created equal by God and have God-given inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Like religion, ethnicity in the United States is a form of voluntary association between individuals that flourishes without government regulation. The United States is a pluralistic society. This pluralism is not unique to the present. From its beginning, the United States has been made up of many peoples, with some groups having more or less power than other groups. In American history, not all groups of persons have equally enjoyed the rights of citizenship.

In African Americans’ efforts to move from mere relationship by common racial designation based on physical appearances, their conceptions of black racial identity and black solidarity have functioned much like ethnicity, particularly with an emphasis on ancestry, heritage, religious beliefs, and moral values. In religious and secular institutions and even through government structures, African Americans have voiced their concerns and acted to address matters affecting their existence and quality of life. This inspired protest and activism is a sign of the grave spiritual crisis of the American nation, where the high moral ideals of freedom and democracy are often diminished by deep-seated injustice. Thus the black experience in the United States “reflects some of the richest dimensions of the human experience and human

existence and also some of its most oppressive and wretched realities.”⁴ African American experience, which may also be true of other ethnic groups in the United States, exposes the beauty and cruelty of human life in America.

DEFINING AFRICAN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

African American theology is a study and interpretation of religious beliefs and practices regarded by African Americans as significant, having either positive or negative consequences for their existence and quality of life. When focused on Christian beliefs, African American theology represents an understanding of God’s freedom and the good news of God’s call for all humankind to enter life in genuine community, with true human identity and moral responsibility. Defined in this way, African American theology crafts meanings of freedom, a central concept in both Christianity and American culture. In the American context, African American theology shows that racism, among other forms of injustice, complicates the human predicament, and its eradication requires nothing less than an enlargement of salvation to include the liberation of persons who lack full participation in society.

The term “African American theology” is coming into more use for two reasons. First, the phrase is meant as a covering term for various theological studies dealing with the religious traditions of persons comprising the African American population. African Americans are not monolithic. Even with common ancestry, the connections with black sub-Saharan peoples, African Americans have religious, political, economic, and cultural differences. The largest percentage of African Americans are the descendants of Africans, mostly from West and Central Africa, who were enslaved in the United States. The suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade coupled with the Domestic Slave Trade of the South had profound consequences for the growth of the native-born slave population.⁵ At the time of the Civil War, with few Africans then being imported directly to the United States, the four million persons forming a majority of the American slave population were born in the United States and generations removed from their African ancestors, though condemned by law to follow their condition of servitude. Since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, a substantial and rising number of Africans, with the largest contingency from Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Ghana, have settled in the United States. Another

significant wave of immigration has come from blacks in the Caribbean, mainly from Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Dominican Republic, and Barbados. Recent African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants have not assimilated into the native-born African American population, as happened when their numbers were smaller, but have instead formed communities to continue their unique religious and cultural traditions. African American theology is a phrase meant to encompass theological studies of the varieties of traditions among the numerous black peoples who make up the African American population.

Second, the phrase is used to avoid generalization and reductionism. The phrase “African American theology” allows an important distinction for “black theology” and “womanist theology” as specialized studies in contemporary systematic theology. Black theology and womanist theology are African American theology. However, not all African American theology is black theology or womanist theology. Black theology and womanist theology may be regarded as forms of liberation theology. Emerging in the 1960s and aligned with the black power movement, black theology addresses, often but not always from a Christian perspective, the oppressions rooted in racism. Beginning in the 1980s and endeavoring to be holistic, womanist theology addressed the oppressions rooted in the triad of sexism, racism, and classism. Because not all African American theologians are doing liberation theology but still attempt to bring African American contexts, interests, and sources to bear on the theological topics they study, the phrase “African American theology” aims to encompass their theological studies as well as those studies of African Americans who are intentional about doing black theology and womanist theology.

If theology may be regarded simply as the study and interpretation of religion or religious beliefs, then it is not limited to Christian beliefs.⁶ Theology could involve the study of beliefs of non-Christian religions. For example, black religious humanism, which will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5, is an intellectual tradition that interfaces with Christian beliefs. Often expressed as reflection on the adequacy of Christian beliefs for black liberation, black religious humanism is an important source for critique of Christian beliefs. Also, African and African-derived religions are practiced among black peoples in the African American population. The African American emphasis on African heritage warrants examination of past and current African religions for an understanding of how these religions illuminate the history as well as the current expressions of African American thought.

In this book, the study of religion and religious beliefs is limited to Christianity, particularly to the beliefs of African American Protestant Christians who share the narrative of the experience of and struggles against chattel slavery and its impact on subsequent law, policy, and custom in the United States. Over the course of United States history, the membership of African American Christians has remained consistent, ranging from 80 to 90 percent in Christian denominations and congregations that are predominately black and Protestant. However, common Christian affirmations are not treated in this book in order to avoid unnecessary repetition of basic aspects of Christianity and, what is more important, the caricature of African American churches as a rival sect in Christianity or a separate branch of the same. It would be a flagrant error in judgment to portray African Americans as having a “black” version of each major doctrine of Christianity such as a “black Trinity,” “black Christology,” “black Pneumatology,” “black soteriology,” or “black eschatology,” although there is casual and random use of these terms in some publications of black and womanist theologies. The book will not discuss an African American perspective on original sin unless there is some argument and special nuance to the concept by African Americans. The book is not a reiteration, in the whole or in part, of Christian dogma or a juxtaposition of African American theology over against Christian theology, as if African American theology represents an invention of a competing worldview. In view of the division of mainstream Christian churches and their inaction against the injustices in American society, African American churches have perceived their existence and mission as crucial to the authentic expression of Christianity, involving belief and practice. African American Christians are not representing an alternative Christianity: they are seeking to practice genuine Christianity. The book looks selectively at topics of religious significance that emphasize African Americans’ contributions to Christian faith by virtue of their historical and social experiences.

LOCI THEOLOGICAS MODERN GENRE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Since the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the style of systematic theology in Western Christianity has focused primarily on the identification and exposition of *loci*, which literally means “locations.” *Loci* are regarded as the main branches or subject areas of theology or, at

minimum, basic topics for discussions in theology. With each locus, there are smaller component doctrines. For example, under the locus of soteriology (salvation), there are the doctrines of justification and election.

The notion and literary genre of *loci theologici* (topics of theology) began in 1521 with the publication of Philipp Melanchthon's *Loci communes rerum theologicarum, seu hypotyposes theologicae* (Theological commonplaces, or theological hypotheses; trans. as *Commonplaces: Loci communes* 1521 [2014]), which underwent several revisions until reaching its final form in his 1559 work *Loci praecipui theologici* (*The Chief Theological Topics: . . . 1559* [2010]). Melanchthon's work replaced Peter Lombard's *Sententiarum libri quatuor* (Four books of sentences, trans. as *The Sentences* [2007–10]) to become the premier theological textbook at European universities. The loci, or topics, that Melanchthon chose were inferred from his study of Paul's Letter to the Romans. He identified these loci as the topics of sin, law, and grace. According to Melanchthon, the sum total of Christian doctrine can be constructed under these topics. Melanchthon's style of theology was further popularized in John Calvin's *Institutio Christianae religionis* (Institute . . . , trans. as *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1960]), published and updated from 1536 to 1560. His style of theology was best refined in Johann Gerhard's *Loci theologici* (Theological commonplaces), published and revised from 1610 to 1622 (trans. as *A Golden Chain of Divine Aphorismes* [1632]). Whereas Protestant theologians like Melanchthon, Calvin, and Gerhard focused on topics supposedly at the heart of Scripture, the Catholic theologian Melchior Cano utilized the loci method to focus attention on the sources that support all argument in theology. Cano's approach appears in his work *De locis theologicis libri duodecim* (Topics of theology, twelve books), written in the 1540s but published posthumously in 1563.⁷ The genius of Melanchthon and his imitators was to apply the Renaissance humanists' hermeneutics, modeled on the rhetorics of Aristotle and Cicero, to the discipline of theology.

The Reformers' construal of theology framed by loci, supposedly extrapolated from Scripture or based on incontestable authority, limits awareness of Christianity as a religion being generally meaningful and a life-altering path for human beings. In general, religions are not seeking the meaning of life but instead an experience of life. The religions, each in a unique way, are striving for a certain quality of life and propose certain beliefs and practices that will help persons

to achieve that quality. By the Reformers' selected topics (loci), it is not always clear that Christianity as a religion is aimed at a particular quality of life.

While the loci method represents an established and widely used genre, it has not resulted in any uniformity in theology. There are numerous and varying lists of loci. Not only do the lists contain different loci; lists with similar loci are also arranged differently. Melancthon's *Loci praecipui theologici* contains twenty-four loci, which include God, creation, free will, sin, law, gospel, grace, good works, Scripture, church, sacraments, predestination, kingdom of God, resurrection, prayer, human government, and Christian liberty. The loci used by Gerhard are Scripture, God and Trinity, Christ, church, and ministry. The loci used by John Calvin are God, Christ, salvation, and church. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth's multivolume work *Church Dogmatics*, designed to cover all Christian doctrines, is organized around the loci of revelation, God, creation, reconciliation, and redemption. In contrast to Barth, Paul Tillich's three-volume *Systematic Theology* is organized around the loci of reason and revelation, being and God, existence and Christ, life and the Spirit, and history and the kingdom of God. Now, in the twenty-first century, students can expect to see all or some of the following loci in theology textbooks: revelation, God, creation, human being and sin, Christ, salvation, Holy Spirit, church, and last things.

There are benefits but also limitations to the loci method. It does bring some organization to Christian theology, but not all beliefs or doctrines are treated thoroughly and evenly. For example, though Melancthon claimed to have developed a system for the study and interpretation of the whole of Christian faith, he omitted discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, preferring to treat the Trinity as a mystery, like other divine mysteries to be adored rather than investigated. He affirmed the incarnation and the two natures of Christ, but he did not address any metaphysical questions about how the two natures are both fully present and operative in Christ. Similarly, in the works of other systematic theologians, their treatment of topics is selective and uneven. The reader will notice that this book is likewise selective in its treatment of topics in African American theology. This acknowledgment of selectivity is important in order to show the connection with, yet also the departure of this text from, other works in systematic theology using some form of organization around a particular set of topics or themes.

The loci method is problematic when there is lack of awareness or denial of the arbitrariness of the topics. Reformist theologians claimed that the loci (topics) are derived from Scripture. Clearly, while they were using Scripture, the hermeneutics by which they derived the topics was largely influenced by the pedagogy and literary theory of the Renaissance humanists. If the topics were as obvious as the Reformers assumed, then it would stand to reason that these topics would have been recognized by earlier Christian theologians. For example, Augustine, a teacher of rhetoric, did not use the loci (topics) method for Christian theology.

Other unfortunate consequences of the loci (topic) method are the tendency of Christian theologians to treat the topics as concepts and thus regard theology mainly as the clarification of these concepts by supposedly proceeding in an objectively neutral manner. When theology is fixated on the task of clarifying topics as categories, theology becomes esoteric and disconnected from the lived experience where Christian faith is expressed and evolves. In theology, as in Western thought as a whole, scholarly study is said to take place among a “community of intellectuals [that is] raceless and shares only work-related problems of methodology, analysis, craftsmanship.”⁸

Adolf von Harnack identifies encounter with God (or Jesus Christ and his gospel) as the constant in Christianity.⁹ Religious faith is dynamic, arising from lived experience shaped by encounter with God. Testimony (i.e., self-reporting, witness, or narrative) is offered in response to the encounter. It is testimony and not dogma that is fundamental in the propagation of faith. Stories of individual encounters with God hold forth the possibility for other persons to encounter God. Lived experience is prior to theological reflection and must continue to inform theology; only thus can theology be a study that represents actual religious traditions. Theology best functions to enable us to remember, retell, and relive the divine encounters that empower, enlighten, and then transform us. Experience is something to which we must always return. Theology, which may begin with speculation, is enriched when it returns to and is reckoned with the experiences that give rise to our initial thoughts.

Over the history of Christianity, the majority of theological writing has not been in the genre of theological loci as common now in systematic theology. For the most part, theology has been devoted to the development of statements (i.e., answers and solutions) directed to specific issues and problems of concern to theologians and their audience

at a given time. This practical approach has resulted in the production of theology through sermons, letters, pamphlets, essays, and editorials to address specific challenges or issues at particular times and under certain circumstances.

Lacking awareness of the origin and development of the loci method, theologians rarely exhibit any sense of the limitations of the loci method and how the so-called traditional topics, though far from any uniform list, constitute a coherent whole. The Protestant Reformers' insights and creativity, framed within a particular historical and cultural context, have become dogma and applied generally for theological studies. The unquestioned assumption is that genuine theology must not only proceed from loci (or topics) but also from a definite set of loci (or topics). The innovation of the Reformers has been eclipsed by an orthodoxy that actually terminates theological studies. The Reformers' insights were gained through a new approach to Scripture, which has always been important to the church, but now these Reformers are deemed the principal source of theology. Martin Luther, a professor of biblical studies, sought to ground theology in the reading of the Scriptures. If theology, as Luther argued, is founded upon the Scripture, then our reading of biblical texts must be more rigorous than his. It is impossible for us to advance theological inquiry beyond what the Reformers accomplished unless, for reading sacred texts, we make full use of the critical, analytical, and historical tools of today. Might not we gain new insight by our fresh reading of the Scriptures?

Though this book does not present African American theology through an exposition of Scripture, it does presuppose a particular and what might be a fresh reading of Scripture. A rereading of Genesis 2–3 is fundamental for a renewed and robust mythos to halt the erosion of religion in modernity. The alteration of earlier oral and written sources in Mesopotamian mythology (e.g., Enki and Ninhursag in Paradise, in *ANET* 37–41; and Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree in the Epic of Gilgamesh, tablet 12; and the origin of humans in the *Enuma Elish*, tablet 6) by the writers of the Hebrew Bible and the reinterpretation of the Hebrew Bible by later Christian writers (e.g., Paul's assertion that sin entered the world through Adam and Augustine's development of the doctrine of original sin) obscure meanings in the primal religions of the ancient Near East. Paul's interpretation of Jesus as the Second Adam, who removes the sin and death caused by the First Adam, and Augustine's development of the doctrine of original sin are possibly attempts (though now seen as poor ways) of constructing Christian

thought on the human condition and the universality (i.e., general relevance) of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The redaction and reinterpretation of the primal myth of human origins in Genesis 2–3 shifts attention to commitment to (maybe fear of) Yahweh and the depravity of human nature and away from primal religion's interest in human agency and the relation of human beings to the realities of their physical and social environment.¹⁰ The survival of religions, Western and non-Western, is in the creation of world community and the connection of temporal life with the eternal. In what sense, if any, can the modern person be a Christian? In response to this question, Josiah Royce has proposed that they can indeed be Christian if Christianity is focused on universal community and, true to its historical sources, identifies the moral burden of the individual (i.e., the human predicament aggravated by the misdirection of human efforts away from community) and the power of atonement (i.e., the ultimate remedy of the moral burden in actions that build and sustain community). According to Royce, focus on these basic ideas in Christianity not only keeps the church centered on its mission but also widens the church to the larger project of enabling human life, in all of this diversity, to flourish in the world.

The current challenge of Christianity (as well as other historical religions) is to provide depth, connection, identity, and purpose for human beings in the complex web of global economic and political interactions and the fragile physical environment on which human life depends. Modernity is not only hostile to religion but also, through its preoccupation with the temporal, deprives most people of an adequate understanding of soul in order to engage eternity. "Eternity is life in its fullness, and temporal existence is life striving after an infinite fullness it cannot comprehend in any finite sequence of moments."¹¹ Properly understanding eternity becomes crucial for personal and social transformation. If human beings are to be fulfilled, they must be challenged by notions of eternity, life in its fullness.

The previous discussion about the loci method may be summarized in the following three points. First, the loci (topic) method is a development that arose only a few centuries ago. For most of the history of Christian thought, loci (topics) have not been used. Second, there is no uniform list of topics, though some topics tend to be repeated more than others. Although Christian theologians may be intentional in their use of topics and may provide plausible rationales for their selection of topics, there still remains some arbitrariness in the use of topics. Third, the topic-specific approach is useful but does carry with

it certain limitations and risks. Given these limitations and risks, the topics that I am proposing should not be regarded as absolute descriptors of the elements of African American Christian theology.

CONFIGURATION OF LOCI FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

In chapters 5 through 13 of part 3, the loci chosen for African American theology do not follow strictly the usual listing of topics in most theology texts. These topics for African American theology have been chosen for three reasons. First, the topics are generalized and allow for study not only of Christian beliefs but also of non-Christian beliefs. This approach makes possible the study of Christianity as a religion and then as a religion in comparison to other religions. Though this book does not undertake this comparison, it lays a foundation for comparative studies at a later time.

Second, the loci have been selected to facilitate the study and interpretation of “religious speech” in African American communities. Instead of theology defined narrowly as God-talk, in this book, it is treated as religion-talk. Religious speech or religion-talk is the expression of ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and practices relative to matters of ultimate concern to persons in community. The aim of the book is to examine the specified religion in its obvious and overt forms as well as in its concealed forms, in symbols that convey African Americans’ conscious awareness of their life experiences and cultural practices. Too often theology is disconnected from the academic study of religion as a pervasive phenomenon in human society. The loci selected for this textbook represent topics for the study and discussion of how “faith,” which may or may not be Christian, has been expressed in African American history. The examination of Christian beliefs in this textbook should not be mistaken as the reduction of African American religion to Christianity only.

Our focus on religious speech or religion-talk has pragmatic and normative features. This focus enables us to give serious consideration to positive and negative interpretations of beliefs, in order to ascertain the nature and importance of the belief and its relevance to African Americans’ lives. The languages of affirmation and negation are necessary for clarification of matters deemed to be of ultimate concern. As a normative discipline, theology does more than describe what persons

believe or how they believe differently. In theological study, there may be stipulation of criteria governing religious speech. Determination of “good” religious speech, in the opinion of persons who use this religious speech, encourages internal critique in addition to scholars’ judgments originating amid different sets of standards.

Third, the selected topics represent a schema that is alternative to the paradigm of theology fixated on the *loci theologici* in Protestant orthodoxy. Given the rigidity of the paradigm, important questions on human identity in theological anthropology are ignored or not addressed adequately because of the inordinate concentration on the idea of original sin, in particular the notion that sin more than anything else defines who we are as human beings and our relationship to God. Could it be that God relates and interacts with us in ways other than our having sinned or not sinned?

Though the topics of this book are not inherently or, even by some accounts, remotely “theological” in the so-called traditional (post-sixteenth-century) sense, the topics may still be correlated with the usual loci in most Christian theology texts. An approximate correlation is as follows:

Loca in Traditional Theology (after 16th c.)	In <i>African American Theology</i>
Prolegomena	chapters 1–4
Revelation	chapters 4 & 7
God	chapters 5 & 8
Creation	chapter 12
Human beings	chapters 6 & 7
Christ	chapter 9
Salvation	chapter 9
Holy Spirit	chapter 7
Church	chapters 10 & 13
Last things	chapter 11

FREEDOM AS AN OVERARCHING THEME

Freedom may be utilized as an overarching theme to unify and illuminate the loci (topics) of chapters 5 through 13. Why this emphasis on freedom? Freedom is a central category of African American experience. It is also an important concept in American culture.

Freedom in African American experience is shaped through four contexts: (1) constitutional secularism, (2) the nonregulation of religion, (3) resistance to oppression, and (4) Christian conceptions of egalitarianism and liberty. The American Republic was formed without an established church. However, the new republic was predominately Christian. The democratic ideals of individual liberty and equality of persons, framed in the Constitution, are patently similar to Christian conceptions of spiritual egalitarianism and freedom in Christ or the Holy Spirit. Yet the United States Constitution maintains a separation between church and state, which contributes to an interesting dynamic for the expression and influence of religion in the public square.

The First Amendment to the Constitution, in reference to religion, contains important clauses affecting religion. The two most obvious clauses relevant to religion are known as the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause. The Establishment Clause prohibits the government from creating and supporting an official religion for the nation. The Free Exercise Clause prevents the government from curtailing the expressions of religion arising from persons' choice. Also, in the First Amendment, the Free Speech Clause and Peaceful Assembly Clause have major consequences for the practice of religion in the United States. These latter clauses guarantee that religious speech is unregulated by government and that persons who engage in religious speech may gather and organize according to their shared interests. If religion in the United States appears, however, to be regulated, it is because of self-imposed restrictions. The various associations that persons form are governed by principles that they voluntarily accept.

The rights of citizenship as defined by the Constitution were not, from the beginning of the United States, granted en masse to black people. In order to bolster the number of white Southern elected representatives in the Congress, blacks were counted as three-fifths of a person.¹² This provision in the Constitution was crucial for white Southerners because black slaves outnumbered whites in their states. For example, in 1860, before the outbreak of the Civil War, the black population, slave and free, accounted for nearly 59 percent of the total population in South Carolina. The relatively small percentage of free blacks, in the North and the South, lived under extreme restrictions and the fear of capture into slavery.

The concept of citizenship (or civil) rights and the meaning of freedom has been shaped by black protest and activism directed at specific injustices. In 1794, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen wrote a

pamphlet, *A Narrative to the Proceedings of the Black People during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia*, to counter a white press that accused blacks of robbing the homes and businesses of whites fleeing the city when the yellow fever struck. Step-by-step Jones and Allen refute the white journalist's argument and shift the focus to what they saw as the real problem in Philadelphia: slavery and numerous other political and economic barriers that deprived blacks of greater contribution to the city. Jones and Allen's pamphlet marked the beginning of a black protest rhetoric that utilizes media communications and argues the worthiness and right of blacks to enjoy greater participation in American life. More recently, since the 1960s, freedom has meant very tangible things such as access to and enjoyment of public accommodations, such as education, transportation, customer service, and housing. The famed 1963 Birmingham Civil Rights Campaign had as its goal the accomplishment of four demands: (1) the desegregation of all amenities within department stores such as lunch counters, restrooms, fitting rooms, and drinking fountains; (2) the upgrading of employment opportunities, including the hiring of Negro sales clerks; (3) the dismissal of all charges against persons involved in peaceful protests; and (4) the formation of a biracial committee to establish and monitor the integration of public schools, parks, libraries, swimming pools, and other facilities used by the public. Thus, what freedom means at any given time is influenced by what African Americans have seen as obstacles to be overcome or rights and privileges to be secured.

Spiritual egalitarianism and Christian liberty have contributed substantially to African American thought on freedom. Spiritual egalitarianism is the belief that all persons are equal and infinitely valued in the sight of God. It is a belief that is reinforced by other Christian concepts such as the priesthood of all believers, emphasizing that all Christians have direct access to God; freedom from the power and various manifestations of sin; and the work of the Holy Spirit, who acts impartially in bestowing spiritual gifts and callings. Christian liberty, freedom from sin, is especially impactful when sin is defined broadly to encompass not only personal moral failure but also systemic evils rooted in social structures. When denied civil rights and equal protection of the law, African Americans found ground for equality in Christianity. Though not an official religion of the United States, Christianity is prevalent in the United States. Adhering to the same religion as enslavers and oppressors, African Americans could cite fundamental tenets of this shared religion that contradicted the injustices in American life.

The future of African American theology, in particular black and womanist theologies focused on liberation, requires further investigation of the concept of freedom in Christianity. While the Christian idea of freedom has resonated with African Americans in their economic, social, and political struggles, the concept is minimally useful due to the obfuscation of wisdom traditions overwritten by Judaism and Christianity during the Axial Age. Karl Jaspers coined the term Axial Age to refer to the period in human civilization when major cultural ideas were constructed and around which new institutions and traditions were formed.¹³ For example, the Hebrews reworked earlier Mesopotamian mythology on origins to construct a narrative of Israel's beginning. This reworking of ancient mythology, such as found in Genesis 2–3, was altered even further in the theologies of Paul and Augustine.

Why is early mythology so important? We now have our exegetical tools for source criticism and the connection of these prebiblical traditions to the earliest human beings, as they tried to understand themselves and their place in the world. Thus we stand to gain from study and reflection on these wisdom traditions, which provide context for and contrast to the now-loaded terminology of Christian theological anthropology. As stated before in this introduction, the experiment begun by the Reformers is to read Scripture. If persons dare to take up that task of reading, then new insights may emerge.

In Christianity, the concept of freedom is disassociated from its meanings in primal religion. The recovery and revitalization of mythos is needed in order to articulate a credible narrative that deepens consciousness of the global realities of humankind and the tasks of seeking meaning and fulfillment in this new global context. In addition to the study of primal religions, the natural sciences offer stories (i.e., empirical facts arranged in narrative form) that describe the contexts of humans in nature and therefore hold clues on how, from our religious traditions, we may plausibly speak about the meaning of human life in the universe.¹⁴ In *Race and the Cosmos*, Barbara Holmes suggests that African Americans' view of themselves in nature (what we see and observe in space) may disclose grander meanings of human existence than the conceptions of life narrowed by the ideologies emerging from social and political struggles in American life.¹⁵ In a subsequent work titled *Liberation and the Cosmos*, Holmes defines freedom as the ability and condition necessary for human fulfillment and flourishing in the cosmos.¹⁶

Charles H. Long, a historian of religions, speculates that the great contemporary crisis, if resolved, has the potential for launching another axial transformation in the global reality of humankind. The migration of peoples from Europe, starting in the fifteenth century, has formed a complex web of organization and interaction. This migration altered the identities of Europeans as well as the identities of the peoples whom they encountered. All these identities are linked with interpretations of the past and visions of the future. In the modern period of global contact, the world religions, including Christianity, have failed to present a grand narrative or overarching mythos to provoke human introspection and inspire action toward building universal community. This failure of religion is due to internal institutional problems and external assaults of modernity.

Freedom is best regarded as a deep symbol of the fundamental reality of human existence. We are not merely persons in a body politic but also persons in the universe. The quest for freedom in sociopolitical terms is symbolic of a deeper quest for human fulfillment, as we consider our overall context of existence in the cosmos. If consciousness is “embodied agency,” then what religious teachings and mythos will enable us to grasp this truth about ourselves and gain the wisdom required to live successfully in light of this truth? Free creative action is intrinsic to human beings. Freedom is essential to human beings. However, for those persons who experience oppression, resistance may consume much of their labor to the degree that liberation is mistaken as the goal of human being. More to the truth, liberation is a means to another end. The desired end is universal community—a new reality beyond the conflicting identities among humans in social arrangements that fall short of the highest ideal of culture. The ultimate aim of the culture is human survival and fulfillment. The focus of culture is (or should be) a crucial question: How do we structure, discipline, and deepen subjectivity for the survival and fulfillment of the individual and the group? Religion is key to answering this question. Through religion, humans learn and practice freedom by imitating God (or the gods).¹⁷

Focused now on Christian beliefs, *African American Theology: An Introduction* depicts African American theology, in a positive sense, as an authentic representation of God’s freedom and the good news of God’s call for all humankind to enter life in genuine community, with true human identity and moral responsibility. Defined in this way, African American theology crafts meanings of freedom, a central

concept in both Christianity and American culture. In the American context, African American theology shows that racism complicates the human predicament: the eradication of racism requires nothing less than an enlargement of salvation to include the liberation of persons who lack full participation in society.

DESIGN OF THE BOOK'S PARTS AND CHAPTERS

In parts 1 and 2, information on history and methodology are presented before exploring the thoughts of African American Christians on the topics in part 3. Part 1 presents chapter 1, a historical overview of black theology. Part 2 consists of chapters 2–4, which deal with matters in methodology. Part 3, with chapters 5–13, discusses themes and issues in African American religious life. Parts 1–2 are background studies for the third part. After part 1 focuses on expressions of black theology in both Christian and non-Christian religious traditions in the United States, parts 2 and 3 focus on black theology in Christian religious traditions.

There are three important features of the chapters. Most chapters end with a summary of the main ideas discussed in the chapter. Following the summary is a set of questions for reflection and discussion. Last, to round out the chapter, is a bibliography with suggestions for further reading.

The reader does not need to accept my choice of loci (topics) for African American theology or my presupposition of freedom as a unifying theme and deep symbol of the human quest for fulfillment. The design of the chapters is not intended as a defense or support of my approach and presuppositions. In the preface and introduction, my aim is merely to inform the reader of my motivation and bias as both relate to this textbook. Because numerous books explain the basic doctrines of Christianity, this textbook omits discussion of several fundamental Christian beliefs so as to avoid undue repetition. Instead, my concern has been to suggest topics around which attention may be focused on African Americans' unique contributions to Christian theology. The key word is "contribution." I am reluctant to treat African American theology as some kind of special branch of Christianity or a complete system of thought juxtaposed to other significant traditions of Christianity. If African American theology in African American Christian

churches aspires to be an articulation of the Christian religion, it will be much like other Christian theologies. African American theology contributes a limited set of emphases within the larger framework of Christianity. Using a select number of topics, this textbook shows the implications of African American theology for the practice of Christianity in the United States.