

Engaging the Sacred Wisdom of Our Sisters in the Wilderness: A Unitarian Universalist/Womanist Dialogue

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Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1 John 4:7-8)

Those who say “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have not seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:20-21)

Introduction

Womanist thought is one of the most vital contributors to theological and ethical discourse today, giving voice to the experience, memory, and wisdom of African American women. While Unitarian Universalism and womanism are ethically and theologically compatible in a number of ways, womanism is uniquely able to address areas of tension, contradiction, and “blind spots” in Unitarian Universalist belief and practice.

This paper will argue that the Unitarian Universalist movement needs to become actively engaged, in solidarity with, and accountable to womanists, womanism, and with the womanist challenge of wholeness for all people and all communities, without guarantees of success, roadmaps, or recognition. Unitarian Universalism must do these things not only because they are the ethically “correct” things to do, but because we cannot fully live our religious values or reach our spiritual potential until we do so.

I will first offer basic descriptions of womanism and Unitarian Universalism, followed by a discussion of the areas of ethical and theological compatibility of the two movements. I will then identify some of the blind spots that womanism can help Unitarian Universalists address and explore what womanist/UU dialogue might look like.

Womanism and Unitarian Universalism: Contexts

Womanism is an approach to ethics, theology, and life rooted in the experiences of African American women. It grants hermeneutical privilege to the voices of those who have been silenced by the interlocking oppressions of white racism, classism, and patriarchy.¹ Womanist scholars come from a wide range of disciplines, including theology, ethics, sociology, and anthropology.

¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 21-22.

The term “womanism” was coined by novelist Alice Walker in 1983 in her book *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Twenty years later, her definition remains a point of reference for womanist thought and spirit:

Womanist 1. From womanish. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.” A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Traditionally universalist, as in “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves Dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.²

Womanist theology engages the entire range of issues that affect the lives of African American women, not just issues traditionally labeled as religious, spiritual, or theological. Womanism is a theology committed to complete inclusivity. Therefore, as womanist ethicist and theologian Linda E. Thomas writes, “The freedom of black women entails the liberation of all peoples, because womanist theology concerns notions of gender, race, class, heterosexism, and ecology.” Womanism’s tasks, therefore, are to “claim history, to declare authority for ourselves, our men, and our children, to learn from the experience of our forebears, to admit shortcomings and errors, and to improve our quality of life.”³

² Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harvest Book, 1984), xi-xii.

³ Linda E. Thomas, “Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm,” in *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology*, ed. Linda E. Thomas (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 38.

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal and creedless faith movement. Although it remains culturally rooted in its Christian heritage, many Unitarian Universalists today do not identify themselves as Christian. Unitarian Universalists hold experience, conscience, and reason as primary and authoritative theological sources, and therefore encourage and support members on their own spiritual journeys, whatever form that may take. It is a small denomination, with about two hundred thousand members in just over a thousand churches in the United States.

Just as the womanist perspective is shaped by the experiences, past and present, of African American women, Unitarian Universalism is shaped by the social and historical contexts of its members. Demographically speaking, Unitarian Universalists were ranked the highest among thirty religious movements in aggregate social status on the "Protestant ethic variables," which include level of education, home ownership, and patterns of employment. This study, the National Survey of Religious Identification (NSRI), was conducted in 1990, and gives a simple but accurate assessment of this movement's social location.

Unitarian Universalists have the highest average level of formal education of any denomination and the second highest median income. Unitarian Universalists are more likely to be female than male, are politically liberal, active, and are environmentally conscious. Unitarian Universalists are also overwhelmingly of Euro-American descent.⁴ Despite, or perhaps because of, Unitarian Universalism's historic privilege, it has remained a strongly liberal faith. While not having any binding creed, Unitarian Universalists do covenant with one another to uphold and live by a set of the following seven principles:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

⁴ The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1997), 52.

- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.
- *Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.*⁵

Common Ground

Sources

The definitions of both womanism and the principles of the Unitarian Universalist faith have been included here in their entirety in order to make more apparent the ethical and theological compatibility of the two. Both movements have similar guiding principles and generally compatible theological claims and sources. This section of the essay will examine some areas of compatibility between the two.

While most womanists identify themselves as Christian, womanism finds the authoritative voice of God in many sources. Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams writes that it is tragic that so few African Americans did not “write their story into black scripture that would tell future generations about God’s wondrous way of dealing with them in bondage and in liberation.” She argues that the stories and experiences of African Americans “should be scripture just as vital as the Bible.”⁶ Similarly, Linda E. Thomas calls on womanists not only to include historical texts and literature in theological research and discourse, but also to engage the “poor black women who are living human documents.”⁷

While womanist thought draws heavily on sacred literature, most notably the Bible, many womanists also look to secular literature as authoritative source material. Katie Cannon is one of many womanists who make extensive use of black women’s literature in her work. She writes that “in the quest for appreciating black women’s

⁵ Unitarian Universalist Association, *Purposes and Principles*, <http://www.uua.org/aboutuua/principles.html>

⁶ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005), 218.

⁷ Thomas, 45.

experience, nothing surpasses the black women's literary tradition; that it is the best available repository for understanding the ethical values black women have created and cultivated in their participation in this society."⁸ In a society where African American women have arguably been the "most oppressed of all the oppressed"⁹ ever since their forced arrival to this country, storytelling and literature have been one of the only mediums through which black women have been able (until recently) to share their wisdom, history, and recipes of resistance, amounting to nothing less than a "literature of necessity."¹⁰ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes refers to this practice as "subversive and critical ethnography" in her exploration of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*.¹¹

This blending of the sacred and secular is in keeping with the long and widely held African belief that the sacred and the secular are one.¹² Kelly Brown Douglas writes that there is no "secular" in many African cultures, but that "all that is of the world is of God. Every aspect of life presents an opportunity for the manifestation of the divine presence."¹³ Thus anything that can be known or experienced by human beings is sacred and can potentially become an authoritative source for theological reflection. Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes writes in agreement with Douglas's insistence on the unity of sacred and secular: "Today we have come to the point of seeing that religion [the sacred], properly speaking, enters into every relation (emphasis on relationship) of human life. We understand that anything which affects the life, liberty or happiness of human beings constitutes a religious problem."¹⁴

Whatever the sources a womanist is drawing upon, she will apply *herself* to them epistemologically: engaging the material dialogically with her experience, reason, and conscience. Womanist methodology calls for critical inquiry and analysis (reason), and awareness and appreciation of relative and particular sociohistorical contexts (experience). Both of these broad methodological umbrellas are always firmly yoked to the womanist commitment to actions that lead in the direction of full humanity and wholeness for all people (conscience).

Unitarian Universalists use many of the same principles womanists use in identifying sources for theological reflection and discourse. This movement believes that enlightenment, wisdom, and the sacred can be encountered anywhere, because revelation is ongoing. As William Ellery Channing, the architect of American Unitarianism, writes: "We believe that revelation [miracles, the bible, etc.] is not intended to supercede God's other modes of instruction; that it is not intended to drown, but to

⁸ Katie Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum Books, 1995), 61.

⁹ Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 1: 1966-1979*, ed. James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), 324.

¹⁰ Cannon, quoting Saunders Redding, in *Katie's Canon*, 61.

¹¹ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "A Conscious Connection to All That Is: The Color Purple as Subversive and Critical Ethnography," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation and Transformation*, ed. Emilie Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003), 276.

¹² Kelly Brown Douglas, "God-Talk and Black Sexuality," in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 121.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁴ John Haynes Holmes, *The Revolutionary Function of the Modern Church* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1912), 215.

make more audible, the voice of nature,” with all the thought, creativity, and reflection that living an embodied life in nature can evoke in us.¹⁵

Theological Claims

Womanist theology is in accord with black liberation theologian Dwight Hopkins’s claim that “God prefers the poor because God opposes all forms of injustice that block the full humanity of the least in society.”¹⁶ This preferential option for the poor is the theological claim arising from the experience of African American women and men who were (and are) somehow able to “make a way out of no way” through the grace of a liberative and sustaining God.¹⁷ Because African American women are often the poorest of the poor, God is especially concerned with and present for them. Since African American women cannot truly be assured of either liberation or survival until society’s interlocking systems of oppression are removed, then their liberation and survival is inextricably linked to the survival and liberation of everyone else, including white oppressors who must eventually be transformed as well.

In this way womanism is a radically Universalist belief system, as Alice Walker alludes to in her definition.¹⁸ It staunchly holds the position that all people are of God, that all people are linked through God, and that all people are redeemable. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, “a person’s humanity is actualized when he or she, motivated by God’s love, enters into a relationship with God’s creation. To know the love of God is to be compelled to share that love with others. To do so is to realize one’s own divinity.”¹⁹ God is pure, boundless love, and nobody, not even the poorest of the poor or the most monstrous sinner is exempt from that love.

This universalism is grounded not in the individual, but in relationship, in community. In fact, there is no individual apart from community; no self without the other. In her study of the African American Club Women’s movement, womanist ethicist Marcia Riggs writes that “the club woman’s responsible self knew itself in absolute dependence as a sociohistoric self, a self-in-community. This self responded contextually to and acted on behalf of all members of its community because of trust (faith) in God as the ultimate power that calls the sociohistoric self into existence—even as an act of God’s justice. Black persons who are selves in community do not lose their individuality, only their competitive (defensive) individualism.”²⁰ Thus, simply being conscious and intentional about being in community—which is our natural state—results in the development of critical moral virtues like “renunciation (selflessness), inclusivity

¹⁵ William Ellery Channing, “Unitarianism Most Favorable to Piety,” in *Works of William Ellery Channing*, Vol. 3 (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1848), 164.

¹⁶ Dwight Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present and Future* (New York: Palgrave/McMillan, 2002), 54.

¹⁷ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 5-6.

¹⁸ “Traditionally universalist, as in ‘Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?’ Ans. ‘Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.’”

¹⁹ Douglas, 113.

²⁰ Marcia Riggs, *Awake, Arise & Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 83.

(community-building), and responsibility (focusing on mission).²¹ We can truly transform our world by simply being the people God created us to be.

Unitarian Universalist theology embraces the idea that all living things are part of an interconnected and interdependent web of existence. Humans are inherently relational beings, but also have a sense of individual consciousness. Through social conditioning, however, it is all too easy to be deluded into seeing the *individual* as the basic building block of life instead of *relationship*. John Haynes Holmes argues that we need to remain mindful of this delusion because “when the individual is seen correctly, however, as only a part of the social organism, then, in the very pursuit of its chosen work of salvation, religion enters into every sphere of action and becomes coincident with life”—thus uniting the sacred and the secular.²²

With this emphasis on relational universalism and the sanctity of God’s creation comes the acknowledgment that womanist universalism must go beyond the human community to embrace all of God’s creation with reverence and respect. “There can be no holiness,” writes Delores S. Williams, “no unity and no catholicity of the Christian church until it identifies itself in active opposition to all forms of violence against humans (female and male), against nature (including nonhuman animals), against the environment and against the land.”²³ Holmes echoes Williams’s call for a new church, a Church Universal, arguing that “the new church will be a church of the deed as well as the creed; not only preaching Christ, but *doing* Christ...this church will make every social wrong a moral wrong, and every moral wrong a legal wrong.”²⁴

If it is through relationship with one another that we can relate to God, then that which negates relationship or thwarts authenticity—is sin.²⁵ Delores S. Williams, in her discussion of sin from a womanist perspective, describes sin as that which “devalues black women’s humanity and defiles their bodies.”²⁶ Sin is that which isolates, fractures, or prevents wholeness. Ethicist James Poling describes sin this way:

Sin is the denial of loving sensitivity, the turning away from communion with self, others, and God. Sin is the willful decision of the individual to value down the relational aspects of life with its consequences of smaller size for all individuals and the totality of the world. Sin is that which harms bodies and spirits, which refers to the personal, social, and religious dimensions of historically and socially constructed consciousness found in individuals and groups and which also refers to the consciousness of all, which is sometimes called God.²⁷

²¹ Stephanie Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 75.

²² Holmes, 181.

²³ Delores S. Williams, “Straight Talk, Plain Talk,” in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation and Transformation*, ed. Emilie Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003), 119.

²⁴ Holmes, 224-25.

²⁵ Douglas, 125.

²⁶ Delores S. Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” in *A Troubling in My Soul*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 144.

²⁷ James Poling, *Deliver Us from Evil: Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 114, 117.

These definitions of sin are compatible with Unitarian Universalist understandings of sin. As William Ellery Channing writes:

To sin is to resist our sense of right, to cherish feelings or commit deeds which we know to be wrong. It is to withhold from God the obedience, reverence and gratitude which our consciences pronounce to be due to that great and good being. It is to transgress those laws of equity, justice, candor and humanity which we all feel and for which we must answer to all our social relations.²⁸

Salvation, therefore, is the state of relational harmony. It is a state of being in which, through mutual sharing, respect, and nurturance, one reaches one's full potential as individual, community member, and child of God. Linda Thomas refers to this state as the "Kin-dom of God."²⁹ Delores S. Williams argues that Jesus came here to teach us how to build this Kin-dom, writing that "the resurrection of Jesus and the kingdom of God theme in Jesus' ministerial vision provide black women with the knowledge that God has, through Jesus, shown humankind how to live peacefully, productively and abundantly in relationship. Jesus showed humankind a vision of righting relations between body, mind and spirit."³⁰

James Poling describes this state as "characterized by sensitivity which moves toward communion with self, others and God...by the ability to internalize our relationships with others, and give value to the interconnectedness of the relational web."³¹ For Kelly Brown Douglas and other womanists and liberationists, true salvation is not possible without a total conversion of both individual and society.³² Only through acceptance, repentance, atonement, and accountability can this conversion occur.

What is not a necessary ingredient for womanists is Atonement (with a capital A). Many, but certainly not all, womanists take issue with the "theology of the cross," which claims that the primary purpose and value of Jesus' life among us was to die on the cross as a surrogate for our sins.³³ After four hundred plus years of African American women being forced into surrogate roles for white men and women: surrogate mothers to white children, surrogate sex objects for white men, surrogate low-wage worker for just about everybody above them in the social hierarchy—Delores S. Williams argues that it is "therefore fitting and proper for black women to ask whether the image of a surrogate God has salvific power for black women, or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy. Can

²⁸ William Ellery Channing, "The Evil of Sin," in *The Works of William Ellery Channing, Vol. IV* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1903), 152.

²⁹ This is a phrase she often uses in her classes.

³⁰ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167.

³¹ Poling, 114.

³² Douglas, 127.

³³ Womanists for whom a "theology of the cross" is positive and important include ethicist Marcia Riggs and theologian JoAnne Marie Terrell, whose book *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African-American Experience* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998) is an important example of this stream of womanist thought.

there be salvific power for black women in Christian images of oppression meant to teach something about redemption?"³⁴

In her discussion of the doctrine of atonement, Williams agrees with Unitarian Universalist feminist Rebecca Parker and her coauthor Joanne Carson Brown on the subject, quoting their assertion that "the central image of Christ on the cross as savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive...and that this doctrine puts concern for evildoers ahead of concern for victims of evil. It makes victims the servants of the evildoers' salvation."³⁵

For Williams, any theology that leads people (especially black women) to believe that suffering is necessarily connected to sanctity is profoundly un-Christian. Suffering is never redemptive in its own right, but only insofar as it might lead to "critical rethinking of meaning or purpose, as might any life crisis."³⁶

Williams turns the theology of the cross on its head, arguing that the cross is an example of the forces of defilement and evil always struggling to break people apart and keep them from establishing and maintaining right relations. "Humankind," writes Williams, "is redeemed through Jesus' ministerial vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross. God does not intend black women's surrogacy experience. Neither can the Christian faith affirm such an idea. Jesus did not come to be a surrogate. Jesus came for life."³⁷ In the name of Jesus, Williams calls us not just to "right belief" but to "right living."

John Haynes Holmes expresses a Unitarian Universalist vision of Jesus' ministry very much in keeping with many womanists and black liberation theologians, arguing that:

When we see Jesus, after only eighteen months or so of public preaching, hanging upon the cross, with Roman soldiery dividing his garments between them and Jewish Priests hooting at his agony, we may be sure that he had been doing something more in those few months of ministry than speaking parables and teaching prayers. He had been assailing, with the divine wrath of a hater of iniquity and a lover of righteousness, the social offenses of his time.³⁸

Unitarian Universalism is a denomination that has always affirmed and revered Jesus' humanistic ministry as a model of perfect humanity, while rejecting the doctrine of atonement in favor of a doctrine of universal salvation. As William Ellery Channing writes, "our nature is a whole, a beautiful whole, and no part can be spared."³⁹ God made us as we are. God made us in God's own image. He writes:

³⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 162.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 200, quoting Joanne Carson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, ed. Joanne Carson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989).

³⁶ Stephanie Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 109.

³⁷ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167.

³⁸ Holmes, 188.

³⁹ William Ellery Channing, "Self Denial," in *The Works of William Ellery Channing, Vol. IV*, 114.

It is commonly said that an infinite atonement is needed to make due and deep impressions of the evil of sin. But He who framed all souls, and gave them their susceptibilities, ought not to be thought so lacking in goodness and wisdom, as to have constituted a universe which demands so dreadful and degrading a method of enforcing obedience, as the penal sufferings of a God.⁴⁰

Thus the doctrine of atonement amounts to nothing less than “God placing a gallows at the center of the universe...by forcing an infinite being sentenced to suffer infinitely, as a substitute for flawed humanity.”⁴¹

Theodore Parker, the foundational Unitarian minister, social reformer, and militant abolitionist, would agree with Williams one hundred percent. Because of his abolitionist and religious views, Parker was threatened by angry congregants and others who benefited from slavery. He was ultimately expelled from fellowship with every single minister and church in Boston for his theological views, and was eventually indicted for violating the Fugitive Slave Act by sheltering people who had broken free of enslavement. He also put his life and career at risk by publicly supporting (and secretly financing) John Brown’s rebellion and the right of slaves to kill their masters.⁴² Parker did his best to live by the words he wrote in his sermon “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” which remains an important theological blueprint for Unitarian Universalism as we know it today. He wrote that the aim of religion is not to “get people to think uprightly, but to live uprightly, and to get as near as possible to the truth; not all men to live alike, but to live holy.”⁴³

Unitarian Universalism Needs to Listen to Our Sisters in the Wilderness

This paper has already demonstrated many areas of compatibility between Unitarian Universalism and womanism. If they are so compatible, if they share so many core beliefs, then why does the Unitarian Universalist movement need to engage womanist thought?

In short, Unitarian Universalists need to be in relationship and dialogue with womanists because Unitarian Universalism is in collective bondage to sin, that is, we are not in right relation with ourselves or with the rest of humanity, and because womanism can help lead us toward salvation, that is, the wholeness that can only result from the full humanity of all people.

In this case, Unitarian Universalists face two major constraints. The first is the constraint of privilege. Black liberation theologian Dwight Hopkins argues that privilege

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Channing, “Unitarianism Most Favorable to Piety”, in the *Works of William Ellery Channing, Vol. III*, 197.

⁴² Theodore Parker, “John Brown’s Expedition Reviewed,” in *Autobiographical and Miscellaneous Pieces: The Collected Works of Theodore Parker, Part Twelve*, ed. Theodore Parker and Frances Power Cobbe (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 164-176.

⁴³ Theodore Parker, “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity,” in *Channing, Emerson, Parker: Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1961), 141.

is an addiction like any other, and that good intentions alone are unlikely to be sufficient in our struggle with this addiction.⁴⁴

The second major constraint Unitarian Universalism faces is a lack of collective experience with living under conditions of systemic oppression. Although all human beings suffer and struggle, most Unitarian Universalists have not had to find ways to survive under the kinds of interlocking systems of oppression experienced by other peoples, such as African American women. Unitarian Universalist ethicist Sharon Welch writes that the voices of African American women are important to her and to her work, “not because theirs is the only “true” voice...but because these voices disclose a knowledge of gender and race oppression, of ethical responses and strategies, that is critical to my social location and thus of the visions that I, and other Euro-American women and men have of the possibilities for social change.”⁴⁵

Because experience is a foundational theological source for Unitarian Universalists, our theology regarding oppression is necessarily less developed than it could be. For Unitarian Universalists it is extremely difficult to construct a theology that is not rooted in, coherent with, and informed by our personal and collective experience. This may help explain why the Unitarian Universalist movement has constructed such a robust ethical and theological stance regarding same-sex marriage and gender discrimination for example, while constructing much less robust arguments regarding economic and race oppression.

Unitarian Universalists, like all privileged peoples, benefit from systems of oppression. As John Haynes Holmes writes, “our church is an institution dominated very largely by that section of society which is responsible for the social injustice of the present age.”⁴⁶ While Unitarian Universalist religious and political beliefs (as expressed in our Principles and elsewhere) stand in strict opposition to such structures, many in the denomination take too little responsibility for removing those structures, especially if doing so will result in loss of privilege. As womanist scholar Marcia Riggs writes, “Simply put, we must ask ourselves what we are willing to return to the community or live without in order for all to live with dignity, have a place to live, secure life-sustaining employment, and genuinely love one another.”⁴⁷

But the renunciation of privilege is several steps away from where many Unitarian Universalists are today. We must walk a path of redemption. First we must acknowledge our historic and contemporary complicity in the oppression of other human beings, and then we must repent and ask our injured sisters and brothers to forgive us. This means being in direct, active relationship—it means *really asking*, not just asking for forgiveness in our hearts. From there we can begin to atone for our complicity in evil, by renouncing privilege, for example, and by committing to work in solidarity, using what gifts and privilege we have, with all who suffer from oppression. As we do this we will be able to enter into true relationship with one another, with our formerly estranged kin, and with the Ultimacy of which we are all a part.

⁴⁴ Paraphrased from remarks Dr. Hopkins made during the presentation of his paper “Black Theology and Mission” at the conference Black Theology and Womanist Theology in Dialogue: Which Way Forward for Church and Academy, at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Nov. 3, 2005.

⁴⁵ Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 129.

⁴⁶ Holmes, 217.

⁴⁷ Riggs, 89.

Unitarian Universalists also need communities of accountability, especially regarding our antiracism and anti-oppression work. Accountability is one of the most powerful ways of keeping people committed to orthopraxy (what one *does*; how one *lives*) from slipping into orthodoxy (what one *believes*). As a denomination composed of historically privileged people, we are accountable to the people at whose expense our privilege was accrued.

As the author of this paper, for example, I need to personally acknowledge that as a white male, and member of a number of dominant groups, I have inherited a moral responsibility “for centuries of oppression that continues to be perpetrated by those of my race, class and gender.”⁴⁸ I believe that this moral responsibility calls me to engage in active resistance to the oppressions I am complicit in. Although it is difficult for anyone to acknowledge complicity in structures of oppression, Unitarian Universalists can and must do so. Our love for others, especially for our African American brothers and sisters whose lives have been wracked by systems of oppression, calls us to seek out accountability as part of our redemption.

After reading Alice Walker’s “Only justice can stop a curse,” for example, ethicist Sharon Welch acknowledges the sting of Walker’s critique, yet finds that Walker’s criticism moves her to further moral action. She writes that “we are moved to moral action by love and hope, not by guilt or duty.”⁴⁹ “It hurts to realize and acknowledge that we have hurt and exploited others, whether actively or passively through our location within oppressive systems, but that love can help us learn to respond not with guilt, but with repentance.”⁵⁰ When the acceptance of our complicity is felt from a position of strength (repentance), we look eagerly for accountability. For, “Accountability,” Welch writes, “not guilt is the response to critique when our selves are constituted by love for others.”⁵¹

Many Unitarian Universalists are committed to working for justice, but can become “burned out,” worn down or disillusioned by seemingly endless uphill battles, tragic losses, and fragile victories. Many people with the best of intentions can find themselves overwhelmed by feelings of “middle class despair” and hopelessness. Once we decide to commit to the struggle for “the survival and wholeness of entire people” in recognition of their “inherent worth and dignity,”⁵² we still need to find the strength, wisdom, and resolve to see us through. We need dangerous memories.

Sharon Welch writes that “dangerous memories are a people’s history of resistance and struggle, of dignity and transcendence in the face of oppression.”⁵³ They are the collective sense of how oppressed people have survived and even thrived in a world where the playing field has never been level and outright victories were completely out of the question. Dangerous memories are memories that oppressed peoples have always invoked when they have to “make a way out of no way,” just as their grandmothers and mothers had to do before them. We need such memories, she

⁴⁸ Poling, 108.

⁴⁹ Sharon Welch, “The Beloved Community,” in *Spirituality Today: For the Trumpet Shall Sound: Protests, Prayer and Prophecy—Conference Proceedings*, Aquinas Center of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga., October 26-30, 1988 (Winter 1988 Supplement, Vol. 40), 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² From both Walker’s definition of womanism and the principles of Unitarian Universalism, respectively.

⁵³ Welch, “The Beloved Community,” 8.

argues, if we are to find and sustain the strength, resilience, courage, and hope required for resisting the forces of evil.

Unitarian Universalists as a group do not have the same kinds of dangerous memories that African American women and other historically oppressed peoples have. True, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Unitarians and Universalists were often silenced, censored, attacked, tortured, and not infrequently burned at the stake for various alleged heresies—but that was long ago, and most Unitarian Universalists no longer feel a connection to those proto-Unitarian Universalists, if they even know that part of their history at all. Since the early nineteenth century, Unitarians and some Universalists have been highly educated, wealthy, and powerful. Unitarian Universalist literature boasts numerous presidents, Supreme Court justices, publishers, diplomats, and other political, cultural, and economic elites.⁵⁴ Our memories are not so much memories of resistance and struggle, but of success and noble influence.

While many Unitarian Universalists rightly hold up Unitarians and Universalists who risked their careers or lives in opposition to slavery, war, or economic oppression, we rarely acknowledge that those people did so from a position of relative privilege, and were often not supported by other Unitarians and Universalists of their time. While many Unitarians and Universalists have always stood up, many have not. Many Unitarians profited from the institution of slavery and from systems of economic and gender oppression from which many continue to profit. If this denomination has historically been among the best educated, wealthiest, and most influential denominations in American history—it is largely due to the very systems of oppression our ideology repudiates.

Without dangerous memories to keep us from complacency and to keep our struggles urgent, it is all too easy for Unitarian Universalists to become the white liberal clergymen Martin Luther King Jr. castigates in his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” King writes:

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say “wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your brothers and sisters at whim;...when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an outright cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society;...when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”;...when you are forever fighting a degrading sense of “nobodiness”; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.⁵⁵

People who have a certain degree of privilege often lack dangerous memories, having foundational memories of power, control, and success instead. Even our memories of suffering, pain, and despair are likely to be experienced as personal rather than collective in nature, and are unlikely to be the result of interlocking systems of oppression due to our social location.

These memories do not generally serve us well in struggles for justice, but rather “reinforce the defense of privilege and often evoke despair or cynicism in the face of

⁵⁴ This Web site is typical of such literature: <http://www.uga.edu/~uuyan/famous.html>

⁵⁵ Welch, quoting Martin Luther King Jr., in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 155.

oppression.”⁵⁶ These memories often prevent the move from critique to action. As such stories are stories of power, conquest, and economic affluence—“many middle class people are paralyzed” by the realization that their most fervent and sincere efforts at social change do not appear to have anything near the level of immediate success found in all their other foundational stories.⁵⁷

One of the reasons Unitarian Universalists need to be in relationship with womanism is so that through building genuine relationships and truly “listening to the voices of African American women, we will discover that these voices disclose a knowledge of gender and race oppression, of ethical responses and strategies, that is critical of our social location and thus of the visions that we have of the possibilities of social change.”⁵⁸ Any ethic we use needs to be an “ethic of risk,” that is, an ethic that recognizes that “uneven, ambiguous, and fragile gains are the norm.”⁵⁹ This ethic must also recognize that the “power present in work for justice is divine” regardless of immediate outcomes.⁶⁰ These are characteristics that abound in the dangerous memories of African Americans and other historically oppressed people. The entire womanist project is grounded in such stories, and Unitarian Universalists have much to learn here.

The Path to Wholeness

Human beings are not perfect. Unitarian Universalists are not perfect. Womanists are not perfect. Salvation does not require perfection, and falling short of our highest aims does not result in damnation. The guiding principles of both womanism and Unitarian Universalism call us to strive to be the loving and relational beings that we are hardwired to be. We are called to be in right relation with one another, to love and respect one another and, indeed, all of creation. But this is not an easy call to hear, much less to act on, as we are all enmeshed in interlocking systems of oppression designed to keep us from ourselves and from each other.

When we appropriate the songs and words born out of the African American struggle for dignity and freedom in our worship, for example, we must do so from a stance of empathy, solidarity, and a clear and accountable commitment to personal and societal liberation. This kind of engagement can also strengthen the connections between our most sacred beliefs and the experiences that most challenge and affirm those beliefs. Through these kinds of relationships, relationships based on “solidarity with difference”, we can offer up the considerable power of our privilege in a mutual struggle for the kin-dom of god. When this results in opportunities to renounce and redistribute that privilege, we will do so with joy as we experience what Kelly Brown Douglas and others refer to as our “total conversion,”⁶¹ which can also be referred to as a state of grace.

⁵⁶ Welch, “The Beloved Community,” 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁸ Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* 129.

⁵⁹ Welch, “The Beloved Community,” 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶¹ Douglas, 127.

Unitarian Universalism is a noble and sincere faith built upon principles of tolerance, justice and truth. It is a denomination that has stood up to be counted on the side of justice in every major social and political struggle since the founding of this nation. Womanism is also a noble and sincere faith, founded on very similar principles. It is a movement forged out of and in service to the lives, experiences, wisdom, and struggles of African American women. By reaching out in a spirit of solidarity, love, and repentance, Unitarian Universalists can move ever closer to wholeness and reconciliation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the Unitarian Universalist movement needs to become actively engaged, in solidarity with, and accountable to womanists, womanism, and with the womanist challenge of wholeness for all people and all communities in order to better live out our deepest beliefs and move ever closer to individual and collective transformation. I have discussed the relative social locations and contexts of both movements, and explored areas of theological and ethical compatibility. I have also demonstrated some ways in which deliberate engagement with womanists and womanism can play a salvific role for Unitarian Universalism as a denomination of privilege.

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