



PREFACE

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN a long time in the making. It is a compilation of lectures, book chapters, and articles written over the course of my journey as a womanist theologian. The earliest, “Black Catholic Revivalism,” was first published in 1986. The last, “Bearers of Suffering,” was given as a lecture in 2006. The book marks a time in my life to assess where I have come from and where I am going, for, although I have accomplished many things, I believe that the journey is not as yet over. This work then, and its companion, can be seen and read as a series of milestones on my journey from someone completely new to theology and the Roman Catholic faith to a Catholic womanist theologian with more than twenty years of experience teaching and lecturing in systematic theology. In addition, these chapters seek to reveal to those who read them the perspective of a woman of African descent in the United States who has, as have most black scholars, struggled to have her voice heard, especially within the Roman Catholic Church. I hope that Catholic readers will become more aware of the existence and persistence of persons of African descent in the Catholic Church from its inception to the present day Protestants also will be able also to learn of the long history of black Catholics in the Catholic Church as well as their persistent and faithful presence in the black Christian community. For all readers, I hope this work will serve as an introduction to the faith of black Catholic Christians and their participation in the development of Christianity in the United States from the sixteenth

century onward. A key aspect of that experience is that, whether Catholic or Protestant, persons of African descent have worked and played together, have intermarried, and have in their own unique ways served as bridges to each other and to the larger world beyond the black community.

First, I must clarify my understanding of several key terms: *feminist*, *womanist*, *black*, and *African American*. I am a womanist—a Catholic, womanist theologian. Based on my understanding and experience, I define a womanist as a woman of African descent who, in the United States, has also historically been a Christian. Although the womanist movement has expanded globally to encompass black women from every profession and none, it was Christian, especially African American women who developed it into a theological movement, often in ways I am sure Alice Walker did not expect or necessarily agree with. An example of this development is that I, as a womanist, do not use the term inclusively for all women of color as she did. Today it encompasses women of African descent of many religious faiths and religions, including Muslim and Buddhist, as well as those for whom religion is not an aspect of their lives. For me, the most critical understanding of womanist is that of a woman of African descent, regardless of religious affiliation. Throughout this text, however, I will be using the term strictly in its theological sense, to describe a black, Christian, theological religious scholar.

The term *feminist*, for me, encompasses women of every race, but historically it has been seen more as a secular movement of predominately white women with an emphasis on gender issues. This too has changed as feminists, especially Latina and Asian feminists, have become equally engaged in issues of race and class as well as gender. However, for many, the emphasis is still primarily on gender, while womanists, as I define the term, have historically been engaged in the eradication of all forms of oppression, seeing them as intricately interlinked and therefore impossible to separate. The two movements, however, are not in opposition but seek to work in solidarity with each other and other theologies of liberation. In the introduction, I discuss these issues in greater depth.

In my understanding of blackness in the United States, the designation *black* has a collective or umbrella meaning (although that is changing as I write due to the election of the first black President in 2008). It basically includes anyone of African descent. Within that collective are African Americans, that is, persons of African descent who share a particular history—that of slavery in the United States dating back to the fifteenth century in the Spanish, French, and English colonies, a history that has affected, positively

and negatively, their self-understanding and worldview, whether their ancestors were slave or free. Thus persons coming from the Caribbean of African descent are Caribbean Americans; those who have recently emigrated from African nations are Ghanaian, Nigerian, or similar Americans. The term *African American* was often regarded disparagingly by other blacks because of the link with slavery, but a growing number of black Americans, regardless of when they or their ancestors arrived in the United States, are now beginning to identify as African American, following the example of President Obama. In this text, I usually maintain this distinction but in some chapters use both terms interchangeably as I will note.

My struggle throughout this journey has been to bring to voice my concerns about the invisibility of black Catholics in their church, of which they have paradoxically been a critical and historical part since the first century of Christianity. I strive in my writings and lectures to raise awareness of the Catholic church as a church of persons of color who have remained faithful despite all that they have had to endure. I also have sought to raise the consciousness of other black Christians to the presence and participation of Catholics of African descent in Christianity from its earliest beginnings. Persons of African descent are not latecomers to Christianity nor to Catholic Christianity, but rather have been active in helping to formulate theologies, spiritualities, and ecclesologies that emerge from our context as children of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States who have been steadfast in their faith. Several chapters therefore relate the history of black Catholics and the theological understandings that have emerged from within their particular context.

As a part of that context, I endeavor to show how black Catholics have enriched Roman Catholic liturgy and ritual with their music, prayer, and dance. They have encouraged the Catholic church to reengage with its earliest beginnings, invigorating the church as a whole and the Roman rite as the participatory proclamation of praise of God that it is meant to be. Despite recent efforts to curtail individual and communal expression, what has been won at great cost cannot be denied or forced back into invisibility, especially in those local churches where persons of African descent are in the majority.

Another challenge has been to develop meaningful dialogue with Christians of other races and ethnicities as well as those who follow other religions. It is critically important in today's increasingly interconnected world to be aware of and knowledgeable about such faith beliefs so as not to label them as "other," as too many persons of color in the United States have been

labeled. Thus several of the chapters reflect an ongoing effort to dialogue and interact with other persons of faith.

Issues of race, class, and gender cannot be left out, as they have served as a foundation and stimulus for much of my work. As an African American, Catholic, celibate laywoman, it would be impossible for me to formulate and articulate an understanding of God apart from my own particular context. As a womanist theologian, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are all facets of black life and faith that cannot be relegated to the sidelines.

The text is divided into four parts plus an introduction. In the introduction, I set forth my personal journey from the Protestant to the Catholic faith, from an attorney to a theologian, grounding that journey as I must in the historical experience of my ancestors, who came from slavery yet persevered in passing on their Christian faith and their determination to make something of themselves and their children. I stand on the shoulders of a great cloud of witnesses stretching back to an unknown but still cherished beginning somewhere in West or Central Africa. My journey is one that began and continues in the shoes of my mothers especially, who forged the path that I walk today. The four sections are:

- I. Faith and Worship: the historical experience of black Catholics in the United States, beginning with their origins in Africa and their sacramental worldview, which serve as foundations for their persistent presence in the United States;
- II. Ministry and Social Justice: how black Catholics interpret and live their faith as a response to God's call to serve their neighbor as they serve God and themselves and the difficulties that emerge in seeking to respond to that call;
- III. The Public Face of Faith: how black Catholics recognize and affirm the critical role that religious faith can and should play in the public sector, with respect for the separation of church and state;
- IV. A Womanist Faith Challenge: the critical role that women of African descent have and continue to play in (re)building the black community and the challenges still facing that community.

This work would not have been possible without the support and guidance of my editor, Michael West, who was the first to encourage me to write many years ago when I first started teaching. I thank him for his perseverance in pushing me to complete this book. I must also acknowledge and thank my colleagues in the Institute of Black Catholic Studies and the Society for the Study of Black Religion, as well as those who have mentored and counseled

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