

Foreword

“Repeatedly, Thurman asks, ‘How can I believe that life has meaning if I do not believe that my own life has meaning?’ Thurman poses this question/affirmation to stress how one’s autobiography is connected to spirituality. Whatever one seeks to discover about the meaning of life in general must take into consideration how such meaning is found in one’s own life.”

—LUTHER SMITH¹

“. . . it was the first time that I could be all of who I was in the same place.”

—BARBARA SMITH²

Womanism stands out as a liberatory spiritual praxis because of the depth to which it honors the personal spiritual journey. In the early twenty-first century, we find ourselves at a place where, if popular polls can be believed, at least in the United States of America, large segments of the population have rejected traditional, mainstream religious adherence in favor of various hybrids of spiritual belief and practice that embrace multiple religious threads and even various forms of secularity. Some people claim multiple religious affiliations, while others simply identify as “spiritual but not religious.” Many people question the faiths into which they were born, the faiths of their parents and ancestors. Some leave for good; others leave, then come back with a different perspective and renewed passion. Still others create highly idiosyncratic hybrids by bringing additional faiths or philosophies into their core religion—or dispensing with a core altogether.³ For many people, the new normal is, “I am the organizing principle of my own spirituality.”

In the beginning, the womanist tradition in religious studies came from a place of deeply self-respecting reflexivity—a place of “respects

herself, *regardless*”—against the backdrop of religious histories of gender-, race-, and sexuality-based exclusions and oppressions. The question posed seemed to be, how do I need to relate to this faith and its institution in ways that respect me and my community? Also, how can I forge new pathways (*à la* Harriet Tubman) for myself and others to escape religious oppression, marginalization, or colonization while remaining connected to Spirit? The answers that came from womanists were—and continue to be—polyform and ingenious. We see in third wave womanist religious thought the latest iteration of this liberatory thinking.

The Internet Age—which hadn't even been born when womanism first asserted itself three decades ago now—has allowed us to explore many traditions and belief systems from the comfort of our couches and kitchen tables. No longer do we wait for interpreters to tell us the meaning of distant practices. In my own Baha'i Faith, the principle is called “The independent investigation of truth”—the notion that external arbiters are no longer needed for us to find meaning, truth, or even Divinity itself. While we revere sacred traditions in their wholeness, we find our courage to question, indeed to interrogate, and even to mix and match them in ways that, from our own diverse perspectives, not only suit us personally, but also create new pathways of political and spiritual liberation for others. Womanism is very much about the personal spiritual journey—bringing it from behind the shadows, owning it, and forging new pathways through dialogue and interpersonal sharing that allow us all to be enriched by one another's personal spiritual journeys and reimagine community along new lines of affinity and sacredness.

Third wave womanist religious thought, as showcased in this landmark volume, exposes the inner workings of these hybrid spiritual journeys, their resulting belief systems, and highly varied modes of practice—particularly as they relate to people for whom the terms “womanism” and “womanist” resonate. Sometimes, but not always, these are black women or other women of color; sometimes these are people of other genders or colors. Indeed, many of these authors are people who define their own identities in ways that defy established categories. This work simultaneously embraces, confronts, and transcends intersectionality in ways that some will find maddening, others will find confusing, and still others will find exhilarating.

In early 2010, Monica A. Coleman asked me to serve as a discussant at the Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought conference she was organizing in conjunction with her inaugural lecture at Claremont School of Theology. I was invited to serve as a bridge between the religious and nonreligious domains of womanist scholarship on spirituality. This was only my second or third time

circulating within a religion-focused womanist scholarly arena, and I was wide-eyed with delight, given that my own scholarship was increasingly focusing on spirituality and spiritual activism. What I found at this conference was a welcome eclecticism and “out loud” questioning with regard to how we understand both womanist religiosity and spirituality. I also found provocative explorations of both personal experience and theory/theology at the juncture where religion and spirituality meet issues of social justice and identity, including sexuality, popular culture, politics, and ecology. *Wow*, I thought, *this is what's next!*: vibrant womanist polyvocality, movement intersections, cross-pollination, lovingly rebellious uprisings from within, new members at the table, new topics of conversation, and, of course, new versions of “outrageous, audacious, courageous, [and] *willful*” behavior . . . Would we expect anything else from womanists? Paper after paper, presenter after presenter, impressed me with a breathtaking fearlessness, creativity, innovativeness, or ingenuity.

What I observed at this conference is that third wave womanist religious thought bridges religious studies, women’s studies, queer studies, ethnic studies, theory, media studies, peace studies, ecology, sustainability studies, even futurism, and brings together divergent thought communities in an artful and alchemical act of synthesis. But, stated differently, what it really does is just talk about life with a candor and realness that one only finds when one lets down the guard of the academic walls—kind of like taking the classroom discussion to your living room sofa, spreading out with it, and unbuttoning the top button so that you can breathe with it and really exhale. It is about getting truthful, and messy, and deep—and then putting it all back together so that it makes sense and advances knowledge . . . and human well-being. This is what third wave womanist religious thought is like.

The brave authors whose work is now collected in this volume enable us to confront a host of questions that whisper along the edges of religious studies and religious life. How do we deal spiritually, for example, with issues, experiences, and identities that established religions reject or fail to address? How do we “Love ourselves, *regardless*,” even when our religions refuse to do so, or do so only partially and contingently? How do we love each other—“the Folk”—when religions tell us not to deal with certain kinds or classes of people—yet our compulsions toward universal love and our commitments to peace and justice compel us to break bread and find peace with—even love—all kinds of people? Third wave womanist religious thought gives us space to wrestle with all of these questions and many more. And it delivers us to this realization: Spirit is often the answer, even when religion isn’t. So how do we talk about that? Womanist thought, especially third wave womanist religious

thought, helps create the language with which we can traverse these tricky terrains.⁴

What you hold in your hands is the fruit of the conference, the conversations, and the gestational trajectory created by third wave-identified womanists—female, male, LGBTQ, and straight, black, white, Asian, mixed, Christian, Muslim, indigenous identified, spiritual-but-not-religious, agnostic, reverent, irreverent, insiders, outsiders, one and all—who seek to forge a harmonizing and inclusive dialogue around that toward which womanism tends: a better world in which we can all live as who we are with justice, wellness, ecological vitality, and peace. The bottom line is this: womanism exists to draw us together at the same time that we transform ourselves and the world, to help us figure out how everybody can be included as we hurtle through space on a changing planet, uncertain of our future destination but knowing that, once we get there, we will only survive if we have found how to be “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people.” *Really*.

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Notes

1. Luther E. Smith, “Introduction,” *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 14.

2. Barbara Smith qtd. In Duchess, “‘All of Who I Am in the Same Place’: The Combahee River Collective,” *Womanist Theory and Research* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 10. There is a video interview by Susan Goodwillie that is referenced in Duchess Harris’s more recent book, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

3. From recent research studies by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (www.pewforum.org).

4. Select quotes scattered throughout this foreword were taken or paraphrased from Alice Walker’s definition of “Womanist” from *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).