Religious Womanists and the Influence of Secular Black Women

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The purpose of this article is to convey how womanist theologians in the 1980s and 1990s engaged with the work of secular womanists. Despite having disparate views on religion, both secular thought leaders and religious scholars analyzed the intersectionality of gender, race, and class when constructing Black feminist frameworks and womanist theology, respectively. "Black feminism," according to womanist theology co-founder Jacquelyn Grant, "grows out of Black women's tri-dimensional reality." It recognizes that "full human liberation cannot be achieved simply by the elimination of any one form of oppression." In the post-Civil Rights era, secular Black feminists challenged both the racism of white feminism and the sexism of Black race analysis. They offered a framework that theological spaces would utilize that transcended the limited perspective of white feminist theologians and Black male liberationists. Black women religious scholars adopted the term "womanist" from Alice Walker, which defined their experiences as Black women and their identities as feminists of color. Naming their theology "womanist theology," they constructed it "out of their tri-dimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism."[1]

Womanist theologians, including Katie Cannon, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Jacquelyn Grant, prioritized the radical tradition of secular Black women like Alice Walker and Angela Davis as they developed theologies that challenged mainstream Liberal Protestant belief systems as well as those of the Black Church. In doing so, womanist theologians highlighted Black women and their struggle, elevating their lived experience over religious text and tradition that promoted their subjugation. They

[1] Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (New York: Scholars Press, 1989), 202-203, 209; See Appendix 1.

also simultaneously critiqued capitalism's effect on the Black Church and community through a Marxist lens while building upon orthodox Marxism, which failed to consider race and gender. From the evidence I provide herein, I conclude that a spiritual phenomenon, based on virtues of freedom, activism, and love for community, was present in both the religious and the secular worlds of Black women, creating a commonality between them.

Background

To understand womanist theology and its function, we must first address the sociopolitical climate that birthed a theology centered around Black women and their experiences. The social gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries laid the foundation for the "secularization of religion," which validated religious involvement with political action and provided a "useful set of ideas" for the eventual liberation theology of the post-war period.[2] Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a prominent example of a church leader whose theology developed from the social gospel, which was born from Protestantism and focused on social and economic justice issues. He came from a legacy of activism started by his father and grandfather that included mobilizing and registering Black voters, establishing schools within the community, fighting for equal pay among Black and white teachers, and feeding and clothing the people.[3] Gayraud Wilmore asserted that when King entered the Civil Rights Movement, he reversed the trend of deradicalization in the Black Church and "gave new vitality and relevance to Black Christianity in the USA."[4]

Conversely, a number of scholars argued that King's activism benefited some in the Black community more than others. In his seminal text, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped*

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[2] Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 132.
[3] Clayborne Carson, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the African-American Social Gospel," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude Jr. and Cornel West (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 698–99.
[4] Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2019), 45.

Black America, Manning Marable states that "more than any other Blacks, the clergy commonly…possessed a class-oriented commitment to the acquisition of private property and Black petty capitalism." Therefore, it was impossible for the Civil Rights Movement to "develop a legitimate agenda to reconstruct the political economy of the United States" because its leaders refused to unite with "Marxists and militant social democrats who expressed a sincere commitment to destroy racial segregation." Because of this, many of King's and his colleagues' initial stances were not representative of the Black masses. Some even argued that he functioned as a pawn of the white elite who realized that he was useful in "restrain[ing] the threatening rebelliousness of the Black masses and the young militants."[5]

Liberation theology spoke to some of the absences in King's early activism. On a global scale, it was a communal struggle undertaken by the oppressed themselves. It became fully actualized in the 1960s and focused not only on spiritual factors of salvation but also economic, political, and social effects on the human condition.[6] In the United States, many became radicalized after King's assassination, including Black theologians who sought to construct a theology where "Christ opposed white racism and promoted pride in blackness."[7] James Cone, the founder of Black Liberation Theology, a subset of the global movement, argued that this new theology was necessary because mainstream American theology was a proponent of Black death.[8] He explained that because theology was always found to be most identifiable with its particular community of origin, American theology identifies with oppressors. If Black theology positions Jesus as the liberator of the oppressed, then American theology must be one of the Antichrist.[9] Accordingly, Black liberation theology is one that "[applies] the freeing power of the gospel to

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[5] Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2015), 185, 187.
[6] Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age*, 69.
[7] Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 32.
[8] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 4.
[9] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 6.

black people under white oppression." By this definition, "all acts which participate in the destruction of white racism are Christian." Instead of believing in the white Jesus of the white church, Black Christians should "replace him with the black messiah…who sees his existence as inseparable from black liberation and the destruction of white racism."[10]

While Black Liberation Theology addressed the issue of race, it was not gender inclusive and overlooked the challenges that Black women faced in both the church and the community.[11] By the 1980s, womanist theologians sought to correct narratives and theologies that centered Black men and omitted the work of Black women. Jacquelyn Grant acknowledged the dualism of Black men and women where "Black males gradually increased their power and participation in the male-dominated society, while Black females continued to endure the stereotypes and oppressions of an earlier period."[12] Grant rejected Black Liberation Theology as liberatory because it did not explicitly proclaim the liberation of Black women.[13] However, womanist theology did not solely emerge on the critique of male-dominated theology. It was also a self-defined theology, influenced by a century-long tradition of Black women's activism. The Black feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s majorly impacted the theology, which "sustained interrogation of sex and

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[10] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 10; James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Kindle Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 40, 978.

[11] In the preface to the 1986 Edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone admitted that any black male theologian who ignored sexism as a centrally important problem in society and church is just as guilty of distorting the gospel as is a white theologian who does the same with racism. See Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Grant shares that he later challenged Black male theologians to advance Black women's liberation in the church and society. See Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 207.

[12] Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 833–34.

[13] Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," 840.

gender as part of a general challenge to conceptions of black liberation."[14]

Traditionally, both scholars and activists associated the Black radical tradition with the idea that Black liberation was linked to restoring Black manhood. In her autobiography, Angela Davis shares that she learned early in her career that her femaleness was perceived as a threat by men who insisted that women should not take leadership roles but rather "inspire their man and educate his children."[15] Eventually, she and other female activists of the Black Power era would contribute to and develop the idea of the Black Revolutionary Woman as an attempt to "expand their male counterparts' perceptions of their political, social, and cultural roles."[16]

Katie Cannon, a co-founder of womanist theology and an accomplished ethicist, wrote in *Katie's Canon* (1995) how Alice Walker's four-part definition of womanism served as a critical and methodological framework for her construction of womanist theology and ethics. Cannon argues that "the black female scholar will have little opportunity to expand her creative energy in the direction of liberation ethics if she concentrates on searching for universal truths unhampered by so-called incidental matters such as race, sex, and class differences…[Womanist theologians] have a responsibility to study the ideological hegemony of the past so that we do not remain doomed to the recurring cyclical patterns of hermeneutical distortions in the present."[17]

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[14] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 137.

[15] Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 58; Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, Reprint (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 161.

[16] The Black Revolutionary Woman "…is a worker. She is a mother. She is a companion intellectual, spiritual, mental, and physical. She is what her man, and what her people need her to be, when they need her. She is the strength of the struggle…She is militant, revolutionary, committed, strong, and warm, feminine, loving, and kind. These qualities are not the antithesis of each other; they must all be her simultaneously." See Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*, 67, 91.

[17] Cannon, *Katie's Canon (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021)*, 23, 46, 123.

Although womanist theologians and Black feminists have seemingly opposed "religious" and "secular" labels, their identities as Black women created similar experiences between them. Black women within secular feminist groups had created an intersectional framework that womanist theologians would utilize for their scholarship in the late twentieth century. However, the opposite is also true - in the early twentieth century, secular clubwomen "readily admitted to the precedent of church work in fostering both 'women's consciousness' and a racial understanding of the 'common good.'" They recognized that Black churchwomen were "more than mere precursors to secular reform and women's rights activism" since their "organizations undergirded and formed an identifiable part of what is erroneously assumed to be "secular."[18] Although secular womanists heavily influenced womanist theologians in the 1980s and 1990s, the tradition of activism within the Black community had previously been associated with the church. Secular and religious Black women had always maintained a symbiotic relationship throughout the twentieth century.

Introducing Gender to Theology

Perhaps the most recognizable feature within womanist theology is its inclusion of gender analysis. Womanist theologians engaged with the gendered critiques that radical Black feminists introduced in an earlier period. At the heart of every theory, argument, action, and proposal, secular womanists centered the experiences of Black women who were a part of the working class. As Alice Walker once shared, "so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories."[19]

Historian Robin Kelley claims that the radical Black feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s redefined the source of theory by expanding on who constituted a theorist. Theorists

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[18] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Black Church: A Gender Perspective," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 201.

[19] Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, ed. Alice Walker (Harcourt, 1983), 240.

could include mothers, storytellers, blues singers, poets, and teachers – everyday Black women.[20] Black feminists rejected the "gender-neutral" conception of the Black community that had flourished for a century and understood that a successful movement for freedom needed to address their concerns directly.[21] In the same way, womanist theologians acknowledged how integral Black women's experiences were to the construction of their theology. Jacquelyn Grant argued that the Bible could not be read as "a mere rejection of a White preacher's interpretation of the Bible…The Bible must be read and interpreted in the light of Black women's own experience of oppression and God's revelation within that context." Womanist theology, then, engaged with scripture in the context of Black women's experience.[22] Of course, the idea that lived experience took precedence over scripture, and more importantly, patriarchal doctrine, challenged the institutions that womanist scholars navigated. Even within liberal theology and liberal religious studies departments, there had not previously been a consideration of the intersectionality of race *and* gender. Katie Cannon described the dominant liberal contributions to theology as "abstract moral discourse" because, in many ways, their constructed ethics were not sufficient for the suffering that Black women were subjected to. Alternatively, womanist theologians, not unlike liberationists around the globe, "began not with scripture, as hermetically isolated, but with an encounter with the world and a socio-political commitment."[23]

In addition to prioritizing lived experiences, womanist theologians highlighted Black women's literature as critical sources to engage with. As an ethicist, Cannon argued that "Black women's literary tradition [was] the best available literary repository for understanding the ethical values Black women have created and cultivated in their participation in this society." She could not depend on the dominant ethics within mainline Protestantism to represent Black women because they presented suffering as a virtue rather than a normal state of affairs for a

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[20] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, 154.
[21] Kelley, *Freedom* Dreams, 137.
[22] Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 212.
[23] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 123; Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age*, 102.

disenfranchised population.[24] In *Katie's Cannon*, she cites pioneering educator Saunders Redding, who stated that Black women's writings were a "literature of necessity." They were rarely ever "art-for-art's-sake," but a reflection of their environment. They "[offered] the sharpest available view of the Black community's soul."[25] Ultimately, Cannon believed that a focus on Black women's writings within womanist scholarship would increase theopolitical consciousness in the field and the concept of ethics altogether.[26]

When discussing Black women's literature, Cannon placed a particular emphasis on the writings and life of Zora Neale Hurston. Cannon dedicated two chapters of her self-titled book to the author, whom she considered "both the subject and object of her work." According to Cannon, Hurston had "shed the superficial vestiges of privilege and voyeur status" that she had obtained as a prominent fiction writer so she could collect folklore from people in her community and properly tell their tales.[27] In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, one of these fictive writings, Hurston highlighted the "tension that arises when there is a conflict between what the community advises Black women to do and what, in fact, is done."[28] In other words, her novel exposes the domineering gender norms within the Black community and the consequences of a Black woman acting with agency.

Cannon aspired to influence theology in the same way Hurston had influenced the field of literature. She considered Hurston's work a "prophetic paradigm" because it revealed "the modes of behavior and courses of action" that Black people passed down generationally. When positioning Hurston's life and work in the struggle for racial justice, Cannon referenced Alice Walker, who claimed Hurston's work was an "ethical resource" because she made it her mission to "affirm black people's right to a healthy existence."[29] Walker, who had her own notions of divinity,

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[24] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 58–59, 61.
[25] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 63, 67–68.
[26] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 70.
[27] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 73, 83.
[28] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 84.
[29] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 79, 89.

considered Zora Neale Hurston a part of an "unholy trinity" with Billy Holiday and Bessie Smith, claiming that "[Hurston] followed her own road, believed in her own gods, pursued her own dreams, and refused to separate herself from 'Common' people."[30]

Sharpened Class Analysis in Theology

Like radical Black feminists, womanist theologians also critiqued capitalism. While they were informed by Marxist thought, they partook in the Black radical tradition in a way that they rejected orthodox Marxism and expanded on how class struggle intersected with race and gender.[31] By the time first-wave womanist theologians began developing their ideas in the 1980s, the Nixon and Reagan Administrations had implemented economic policies that were too detrimental to Black people to ignore. While Black Power activists proclaimed that capitalism was destroying their communities, President Richard Nixon promulgated Black capitalism by endorsing "federally funded minority business programs [that] touted the success of a few black corporations and individuals as evidence of U.S. economic vitality and equalizing race relations." By the time Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, the Nixon-era policies had "reached their apogee."[32] Reagan won the 1980 presidential election largely by appealing to white conservatives who were frustrated with the advancements that Black Americans made through the granting of civil rights. He not only cut state and federal social programs that served the Black community and made specifically disparaging remarks about poor Black women, terming them "welfare queens," he also expanded policing and prison development,

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[30] Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, ed. Alice Walker (Harcourt, 1983), 91.

[31] The Black radical tradition as termed by Cedric Robinson: "the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being." See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Third Edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 171.

[32] Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*, 189.

which disproportionally targeted Black and Brown peoples.[33] Ultimately, his administration contributed to racially motivated attacks against Black Americans in the United States and a "geographically and economically segregated social order."[34] During these periods, Black leftists understood that the political mobility they secured during the Civil Rights era did not equate to economic freedom.

Gayraud Wilmore published his 1972 work *Black Religion and Black Radicalism,* highlighting some of the Black left's burgeoning ideas. Within it, he correctly asserted that Black radicalism, as opposed to radicalism in the classic European model, was "less political, less obsessed with ideology on the grand scale, and somewhat less committed to violence as a revolutionary strategy." It was a "form of protest specific to the black community in its struggle for freedom and a more humane existence."[35] However, when defining the three streams of Black radicalism within the twentieth century, Wilmore did not account for Black Christian nationalists who supported socialism.[36] He suggested that Black Christians and Black Marxists subscribed to diametrical opposite ideologies. Because of Communism's association with atheism, this was a prevailing belief among Black scholars. However, in 1979, Cornel West penned the essay "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," which outlined similarities between the two ideologies.

West argued that "Black theologians and Marxist thinkers 'concerns overlap, as both focus on the plight of the exploited, oppressed, and degraded peoples of the world, their relative powerlessness and possible empowerment."[37] He also

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[33] Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*, 189-190.
[34] Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*, 190; Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, xxxiii-xxxv.
[35] Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans,* Third Edition (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 197-198.
[36] See Appendix 2.
[37] Cornel West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 874.

argued that they shared three distinct characteristics:

> 1) Both adhere to a similar methodology, the same way of approaching their respective subject matter and arriving at conclusions. 2) Both link some notion of liberation to the future socioeconomic conditions of the downtrodden. 3) And this is most important, both attempt to put forward trenchant critiques of liberal capitalist America.[38]

Nevertheless, West also stated that Black theologians had not adopted Marxist thought or adequately analyzed what socioeconomic liberation entailed because they could not accept the incessant critical nature of dialectical methodology. He claimed that theologians also lacked a precise social theory that explained how production and social structures related to Black oppression and exploitation.[39] Although this may have been an appropriate argument at the time of publication, in the following decades, womanist theologians would prove West wrong.

Womanist theologians provided comprehensive criticisms of capitalism and improved the class analysis of their male colleagues who had struggled to pinpoint the link between mainstream Christianity and America's economic system. Katie Cannon plainly acknowledged that the "Church sanction[ed] and stabilize[d] the mundane interests of the ruling class." This brand of Christianity consequently "separate[ed] the spiritual person from the bodily person and call[ed] on people to be spiritual and avoid politics."[40] Cannon elaborated on how Christianity traditionally functioned within American capitalism, incorporating several arguments from Oliver Cox, a Trinidadian-American Marxist sociologist:

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[38] West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," 875.
[39] West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," 878.
[40] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 160; Note that "spiritual" in this context means concerned with matters of the heart and salvations and unconcerned with living conditions on earth.

> As the most powerful and dynamic form of social organization ever created, the capitalist political economy generates a political order that is ostensibly democratic but that leaves economic power unchecked. It also generates a suitable religion to nationalize and loosen all social restraints rooted in mysticism and cultural ritual. In other words, Cox argued that capitalism is a form of social organization in which the distinctive economic order slowly shapes government and religious structure into a neutralized network of national and territorial units wherein commercial and exploitive economic relationships can flourish…Religion must become virtually inseparable from capitalist philosophical assumptions, science, and economic thinking. Religious scruples against wealth and worldly activity must cease to interfere with the unconstrained enhancement of material welfare. The separation of church and state comes to mean that the state subjects the church to conditions friendly to our national political economy.[41]

In contrast, womanist theologians did not believe that being a follower of Christ meant that they had to submit to a capitalist order and ignore their social conditions. In fact, they believed that Jesus came to liberate them from those exact forms of oppression. Jacquelyn Grant stated that "Jesus means freedom from the sociopsychological, psychocultural, economic and political oppression of Black people" because he was a "political messiah."[42]

Grant and Cannon's exposure of the Church's traditional function within a capitalist society was a revolutionary task in of itself. However, their acknowledgment that Black women were especially oppressed by a capitalist political economy placed them

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[41] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 148–152.
[42] Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 215.

in conversation with Black feminists such as Angela Davis.[43] In her 1981 book, *Women, Race, and Class*, Davis describes how Black women were particularly subjected to capitalist exploitation after the emergence of industrialization. Since housework did not generate a profit in the "profit-oriented economy of capitalism," it was considered an inferior form of work.[44] Moreover, because Black women made up the majority of domestic workers – many of whom were often employed in white women's homes under extended hours, inadequate pay, and substandard conditions – they experienced the brunt of capitalism's burdens. As Jacquelyn Grant highlights in *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (1989), "classism impacts Black women in a peculiar way which results in the fact that they are most often on the bottom of the social and economic ladder." She adds:

> For Black women doing theology, to ignore classism would mean that their theology is no different from any other bourgeois theology. It would be meaningless to the majority of Black women, who are themselves poor. This means that addressing only issues relevant to middle-class women or Blacks will simply not do: the daily struggles of poor Black women must serve as the gauge for the verification of the claims of womanist theology.[45]

Womanist theologians understood that they could not construct a theology around the liberation of Black women without first addressing the conditions that the masses of Black women were living under. Womanist scholar and Episcopal priest Kelly Brown Douglas believed that their theology was based on Marxist principles, claiming that it was "informed by Marxist thought as it endeavor[ed] to understand the class issues within the black community." However, she also argued that womanist theology

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[43] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 60.
[44] Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, First Vintage Books Edition (New York: Random House Inc., 1983), 228.
[45] Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 210.

surpassed orthodox Marxism, which is solely concerned with class analysis and material interests, in the way that it took seriously "the particularities of race, gender, and culture that shap[ed] the nature of black people's oppression."[46] In this way, womanist theology followed in the path of radical Black feminism and the Black radical tradition, which makes a dialectical critique of Marxism.[47]

The Religious, Secular, and Spiritual

Until womanist theology, there was no formal theological expression that focused on the experiences of Black women. Because nothing formal existed, womanist theologians prioritized the work of secular womanists in the construction of their theology. The most significant difference between womanist theologians and secular womanists was their ideas about God, however, it is important to address how secular womanists expressed spiritual ideas despite their lack of religious affiliation. The final sections of this article will explore the beliefs of Black women inside and outside of the Christian tradition, and the common spirituality that they shared.

As part of the Black Church, womanist theologians subscribed to the Protestant faith in the Holy Trinity – God the Father, God the Son (embodied by Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit. However, womanist theologians put a particular emphasis on Jesus Christ. In 1994, Kelly Brown Douglas dedicated her first book, *The Black Christ*, to exploring this divine figure. She argues that the Black Christ was necessary because of his physiologically Black features and what he meant to the Black freedom struggle between the antebellum era and the twentieth century. The portrayal of the Black Christ in womanist theology thus reflected Christ as a liberator against racism, sexism, and classism. Douglas wrote, "Christ challenges the black community to rid itself of anything that divides it against itself and to renounce any way in which it oppresses others." She added that Jesus' "sustaining, liberating, and prophetic presence" is what made him the Christ, not his maleness. Furthermore, the presence and identity of Christ

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[46] Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 115.
[47] Robinson, *Black Marxism,* xix.

could be found in Black women, especially when they took on these characteristics.[48] This last statement would suggest that the spirit of Christ could be found among women who may not have been religious yet participated in the struggle for liberation.

While womanist theologians in the late twentieth century had shared ideas about God and Jesus, secular womanists could not reach a consensus about their beliefs. Angela Davis and Alice Walker are prime examples of Black feminists who described God in very different ways – if at all. As a Communist, Angela Davis rarely spoke about her religious values. In her 1974 autobiography, she only mentions religion in passing. Her first reference of a Christian pastor is when she details the kindness that she received from Reverend Melish and his wife when she was a fugitive of the state. She speaks fondly of the Reverend, who was a member of the Soviet-American Friendship organization and preached that true Christians were to fight all forms of injustice.[49]

However, despite Reverend Melish's support of socialism and protective advocacy for her political status, we cannot assume that Davis subscribed to Christianity simply because she spoke positively about her encounters. In the next chapter of her autobiography, she shares that she and other members of the West Coast Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had criticized Dr. Martin Luther King, assuming that his "religion, his philosophical nonviolence, and his concentration on civil rights" prevented him from making significant strides in the liberation struggle. Although Davis states that she eventually realized that King's work for poor people was a significant threat to white supremacy, she did not mention adopting his religious principles.[50] Nevertheless, she does conclude her autobiography on an interesting note. On the day she was acquitted for charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy in 1972, she recalls an individual in the corridor of the courtroom humming a Negro spiritual. Davis 'mother joined in on the humming, and Davis "felt

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[48] Douglas, *The Black Christ*, xxii, 126-130.
[49] Davis, *Angela Davis,* 106.
[50] Davis, *Angela Davis,* 176.

happier for her than for anyone else, including [herself]."[51] While Angela Davis may not have subscribed to Christianity or the Christian God, she certainly recognized that they were motivators for her people and their struggle for liberation – a common struggle that she fought, as well. As Cornel West referenced in his essay, Davis was a Marxist who had shared ideas with Black Christians about what a more just future entailed.

In contrast to Davis, Alice Walker openly recorded how she rejected the Christianity of her parents once she left home and embraced her independence. Her writings on God and the divine do not stop there. In many of her works, she discusses her ever-evolving faith. In the 1970 essay, "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," Walker admits that although the religion of her mother and other Black sharecroppers was provided as a pacifier, they turned it into an antidote against bitterness. "Ain't Jesus wonderful?" her mother exclaimed as she referenced her good health and her accomplished children. Yet, Walker still spurned the American theology that her community had adopted, claiming that although they had made it "simple and noble," its members still could not envision a God who was not white.[52] This was deeply troubling to her.

In a 1973 interview, Walker recalled how she prayed to an unknown deity when she had gotten unexpectantly pregnant in college. She was not sure whether she had called on the God of her parents or, perhaps, a "Great Void…The truth is probably that I don't believe there is a God, although I would like to believe it," Walker shares. "Certainly I don't believe there's a God beyond nature. The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake…Like many, I waver in my convictions about God, from time to time. In my poetry I seem to be for; in my fictions, against."[53]

Alice Walker's experience with doubt was not unique. Historically, many Black Americans with radical politics de-

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[51] Davis, *Angela Davis*, 393–95.
[52] Alice Walker, "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, ed. Alice Walker (Harcourt, 1983), 16-17.
[53] Alice Walker, "From an Interview," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, ed. Alice Walker (Harcourt, 1983), 246, 265.

converted from Christianity in the Civil Rights and Black Power eras due to their frustration with the hypocrisy of the white church.[54] However, it seems that by the time Walker published her 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction, *The Color Purple*, she once again believed in the existence of a higher power. The story follows the lives of Black girls in the early twentieth century rural South, who grow up to be women in an environment rife with emotional and physical abuse. The only solace these women find is in community with one another and personal moments with their Creator. In a review of the novel, Jeannine Thyreen highlights how the book redefines the patriarchal notion of God when Celie, the protagonist, discovers a God who is in everything, even herself. Thyreen notes how the preface of the Tenth Anniversary Edition of the novel states that "whatever else *The Color Purple* has been taken for during the swift ten years since its publication, it remains for me [a] theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual that I spent much of my adult life, prior to writing it, seeking to avoid."[55]

Alice Walker's "journey back to the spiritual" has been a common experience among Black women regardless of religious affiliation. Perhaps, as Wilmore claims, this is because their traditional beliefs (that extended back to life in Africa) promoted the idea that there was no separation between the spirit world and the natural.[56] In the early 1920s, Poet Jean Toomer traveled through the U.S. South and recorded Black women's spirituality being so intense that he did not believe they were aware of the gift that they possessed because it came so naturally to them.[57] While serving as a beautiful commentary, Walker disagrees with it in her 1974 essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." She argues that her great grandmothers knew about their spirituality, even if they did not know the full extent of the power they had. Even if they could only exercise it during Sunday church service, they did not

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[54] Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 200.
[55] Jeannine Thyreen, "Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple': Redefining God and (Re)Claiming the Spirit Within," *Christianity and Literature* 49, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 49-50, 63.
[56] Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism,*7.
[57] Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," 232.

intend on giving it up.[58] Spirituality was a means of powerful subsistence and self-preservation for them.

Conclusion

Religious and secular affairs are often separated into their own categories in historical scholarship. However, Black women's traditions in the twentieth century suggest that these realms are more blurred than previously considered. The evidence proves that womanist theologians in the 1980s and 1990s engaged in a critical analysis of the intersection between race, gender, and class just like their secular sisters did before them. However, their similarities do not stop there. Religious and secular womanists also shared the same spiritual practice found in liberation struggle and a love for community.

What does it mean to be spiritual, though not religious? Alice Walker wrote about the inherent spirituality of Black women in her 1974 essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." She would have considered herself a spiritual being even though she vacillated in her ideas about God and had rejected Christianity altogether. Katie Cannon certainly still considered her, and those like her (i.e., Zora Neale Hurston), "contemporary prophets" because of how they broke away from "oppressive ideologies and belief systems that presume[ed] to define their reality." They created a new set of values on their own terms.[59] While the prophetic tradition is most popularly associated with the Black Church and their ongoing struggle for social justice, Black women outside of the church were also involved in this tradition through their challenging of oppressive social norms.

In *Freedom Dreams*, Robin Kelley points out that scholars of social movements rarely investigate the intangible aspects associated with freedom fighting. However, he also shares that "once we strip radical social movements down to their bare essence and understand the collective desires of people in motion, freedom and love lay at the very heart of the matter." "Freedom and love constitute the foundation for spirituality" and radical Black feminism offers one of the most comprehensive visions of

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[58] Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," 232, 237-238.
[59] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 56.

freedom in the way that it considers the interconnectedness of multiple forms of oppression.[60] We can reasonably conclude that radical Black feminists such as Angela Davis and Alice Walker, and religious scholars who practiced radical Black feminism in the development of their theology, were tied to one another because of this shared spirituality.

But what of women like Alice Walker's mother and grandmothers? What about working-class Black women who were not academically trained nor were well-read on theory and theology – what were their spiritual practices like? How did their spiritual practices elevate their conditions? Furthermore, how did they utilize these practices to protect themselves from institutional violence, such as poverty? If they were churchwomen, what did they believe was the church's role in identifying the problem and solution of capitalism? These new questions provide a starting point for future research. While womanist theology may be considered the most progressive Christian theology of the last decades of the twentieth century, Kelly Brown Douglas still stated that "community-based women…will teach womanist theologians how to make theology more accessible."[61]

[60] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams,* 12*,* 154.
[61] Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 134.

Appendix 1

Womanism by Alice Walker

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 nonsexually. 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 nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a 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 other 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.[62]

Appendix 2

Three Streams of Black Radicalism in the Twentieth Century by Gayraud Wilmore

After [Henry M.] Turner, the mainstream of black radicalism in America split in three directions. The self-consciously Christian stream, which he represented, continued as a marginal excrescence of the church and as a quasi-religious black nationalism in Garveyism and the religio-political sects of the ghetto.

A second stream threw off religious influences altogether and continued as a belligerent and thoroughly secularized black racism, empty of any self-conscious ideological or redemptive significance. It was characterized by cynicism about and hatred of whites and could be found among the sporting and criminal elements of Harlem and other black communities. Many young men and women from this second stream found their way into nationalist groups and into the Islamic sects and cults that nourished their personal resentment and nonconformity.

A third stream arose in support of Du Bois and the Niagara Movement – later in support of the NAACP. Christians, were of course, members of this stream, but it was more ideologically mixed than the first stream. It included not only unchurched members of the black middle class who wanted only to remove the barriers to full participation in society, but also the social radicals and Marxist intellectuals who rallied around A. Philip Randolph's *Messenger* and the National Negro Congress

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[62] Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," xi-xii.

of the late thirties. A part of this third stream overlapped or merged with the second and first groups, but they were the exponents of the avant garde esthetic of the Harlem Renaissance more than political adventurers – an essential middle-class movement whose identification with the masses was primarily artistic and rhetorical.

This third development, although not entirely dissociated from the churches, moved in a secular direction and found its inspiration not in the apocalyptic vision of a black Christian civilization restoring the ancient glories of Africa, but in the vision of a democratic socialist society, unabashedly interracial, moving toward the realization of the American dream of equality for all. Its primary institutional manifestation was the NAACP – an organization in which the race consciousness of Du Bois was continually modified in favor of the egalitarianism of a few wealthy white integrationists, and finally proscribed altogether. On one flank it fought off black and white Marxists who at first tried to destroy it and then make it the captive of their program of overthrow in the American government. On the other flank, this bourgeois Negro integrationism battled against what it considered the unrealistic pan-Negroism of the ghetto nationalist movements and Garveyism – the main undercurrent of the first stream of black radicalism.[63]

[63] Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 199–200.