

A Spirituality of Teaching Black Women's Spirituality and Christian Education

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Although African American women have given freely of their time, talents, resources, and commitment to the educational ministry of the church, recent scholarship has not focused much attention on the role of black women's spirituality in Christian education. Consequently, the experiences and contributions of black women in this area have often been excluded or devalued. Despite this trend, it is apparent that black women's spirituality can provide insights for a spirituality of teaching; play a significant role in shaping the content, method, and process of Christian education; and challenge the church to shape educational ministries that are relevant for contemporary African Americans (and others) who are concerned with the social, moral, and spiritual development of the black community.

Black women have been the heart and soul of the African American church for centuries. They have served the church from its inception as educators and preservers of the faith and heritage. Through their teaching, many black women, such as renowned educator and scholar Olivia Pearl Stokes, who spoke out against injustice toward persons of African descent and women, have embodied a spirituality grounded in their faith tradition, their African heritage, as well as a vision for empowerment and social transformation. For many black women, religion has not only been a personal experience but an inward reality that has compelled them toward active involvement in the world. By examining the life experiences of three black women (Milla Granson, Olivia Pearl Stokes, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye) through the lens of their educational work and contributions to social activism, I will explore the relationship between black women's spirituality and Christian education and illustrate how these two elements can inform the content and practice of a spirituality of teaching. I have selected the women in this study because of their deep faith/spirituality and their tireless work to transform the church, the academy, their culture, and the broader society.

A Spirituality of Teaching and a Triple-Heritage Model of Christian Education

In my book *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education*, I introduce a triple-heritage model of Christian education.¹ In short, the triple heritage encompasses African, African American, and Christian roots. Although the three vital components of the triple heritage each contribute something valuable and distinctive to the African American Christian tradition, together they make up a holistic and dynamic heritage. A triple-heritage model of Christian education parallels the three aspects of the African American historical experience. It is a holistic model with interrelated components. In essence, a triple-heritage model of Christian education seeks to preserve and celebrate the full heritage of African Americans; to explore alternative approaches to Christian education that draw upon resources naturally emerging from African American Christian heritage; and to present the triple heritage in a balanced

fashion throughout the curriculum. While *Reclaiming the Spirituals* explores the role of the African American spirituals in a triple-heritage model of Christian education, this study examines a spirituality of teaching within a triple-heritage model through the lens of black women's spirituality and Christian education.

I define a spirituality of teaching as a sense of grounding in one's faith tradition coupled with a commitment to social justice and transformation. The essence of faith, in a triple-heritage model, encompasses more than a personal encounter with God; it is a holistic encounter that necessarily includes communal engagement with other human beings, creation, and God. Faith, then, is an inward experience that can and should compel us toward active engagement in the world.

A spirituality of teaching within a triple-heritage model of Christian education encompasses at least three components: engaged spirituality, engaged pedagogy, and womanist pedagogy. In her book *Engaged Spirituality: Ten Lives of Contemplation and Action*, Janet Parachin borrows the term "engaged spirituality" from Zen Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who refers to his own spiritual journey as "engaged Buddhism."² For Thich Nhat Hanh, engaged Buddhism embodies faith that informs and inspires social activism. In other words, faith is a combination of active involvement in the world with contemplative practices. Drawing upon these insights, Parachin notes that engaged spirituality is reflected in the lives of people who draw from their faith tradition "the resources that nurture their being and enable them to engage in activities that move the world toward peace, justice, greater compassion, and wholeness."³ Hence, both aspects of one's faith (the nurturing component and the active component) must engage in a mutual and dynamic interaction that empowers us for the work of transformation. As the first component of a spirituality of teaching, engaged spirituality underscores faith in conjunction with social action.

The second component of a spirituality of teaching is engaged pedagogy. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks describes engaged pedagogy as a process of engaging students and teachers in educational practices that go beyond stagnant and oppressive teaching methods to dynamic strategies that promote education as a "practice of freedom" and transformation.⁴ Deeply influenced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, she affirms education as a holistic experience that is sacred, life giving, and liberatory. Freire, who strongly critiques a "banking" model of education (e.g., teachers pouring knowledge into students who repeat the information without critical analysis or creativity), asserts that education can be a practice of freedom through critical awareness and engagement. Students and teachers must, therefore, engage in a mutual process of education as active participants, not passive consumers. To overcome oppressive and dehumanizing educational practices, engaged pedagogy must incorporate what Freire refers to as a "praxis" approach to education, or "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it."⁵

While also affirming active engagement and reflection, Thich Nhat Hanh introduces the notion of "teacher as healer," which for hooks provides an alternative view of pedagogy that emphasizes "wholeness" through the union of mind, body, and spirit.

This holistic approach to education with a spiritual grounding invites educators to embrace education as an exploration of intellectual knowledge as well as knowledge that will allow persons to live more fully as human beings. A significant outcome of engaged pedagogy is a sense of well-being for teachers and students. Consequently, teachers are encouraged to nurture their sense of self and well-being in order to teach in ways that are life-affirming and empowering for their students.⁶ For hooks, then, engaged pedagogy encompasses the whole experience of education, including the personal and communal engagement of students and teachers as well as the ongoing pursuit of knowledge and transformation.

I find hooks's notion of engaged pedagogy helpful for a spirituality of teaching within a triple-heritage model of Christian education. Engaged pedagogy first of all affirms the teaching-learning process as a holistic and sacred encounter. Second, engaged pedagogy promotes a vibrant and exciting teaching-learning environment that incorporates diverse teaching approaches and facilitates creative engagement with the subject matter as well as with those involved in the teaching-learning process. Third, engaged pedagogy emphasizes communal engagement, where everyone in the teaching-learning process participates in a mutual dialogue and effort toward knowledge and transformation. Finally, engaged pedagogy emphasizes liberation and transformation, it is grounded in the notion that education is necessarily a political activity that should be concerned with challenging oppressive and dehumanizing practices.

A spirituality of teaching encompasses not only engaged spirituality and engaged pedagogy, but also a third component, womanist pedagogy. This approach emerged as African American women seminarians gathered to support one another; reflect on their teaching/learning experiences; challenge male-dominated texts, interpretations, and pedagogical models; and explore new avenues of research from the perspective of African American women.⁷ In "Metalogues and Dialogues: Teaching the Womanist Idea," Katie Cannon further captures the essence of womanist pedagogy. She maintains that new approaches

invite women and men of contemporary faith communities to a more serious encounter with the contribution African-American women have made—and continue to make—to theological studies. The imperative suggested by this pedagogy is an engaged scholarship that leads us to resist domination through mindful activism and helps all of us to live more faithfully the radicality of the gospel.⁸

Cannon's discussion of womanist pedagogy, grounded in what she refers to as "engaged scholarship," affirms a spirituality of teaching. Like engaged spirituality and engaged pedagogy, it emphasizes the intimate relationship between action and reflection in the struggle for liberation and social change.

Although emerging out of the largely secular academy, womanist pedagogy offers insights for a spirituality of teaching. First, a womanist-inspired spirituality of teaching must facilitate a critical dialogue with African American women. Second, it must

acknowledge and celebrate the unique contributions of African and African American women. Third, it must equip individuals and faith communities to analyze various levels of oppression that confront African Americans and women. And finally, it must embrace all three aspects of the triple heritage (African, African American, and Christian) as well as the unique experience, culture, heritage, traditional practices, and contributions of African American women as viable sources of Christian education. Together, engaged spirituality, engaged pedagogy, and womanist pedagogy make up the essence of a spirituality of teaching, which draws insights equally from each component as it considers critical content and educational practices.

Exemplars of a Spirituality of Teaching

Milla Granson

While many stories of black women's leadership are compelling, the story of Milla Granson (b.c. 1800), a daring educator during the time of slavery, embodies womanist sensibilities and stands out as an example of liberating and empowering educational practices. Born a slave in Kentucky, Milla Granson learned to read and write from members of her master's family. She wanted to teach others the basic knowledge that she had gained and was granted permission by her master to teach other slaves. Grounded in the belief that education is a source of freedom and liberation, she assisted many slaves in writing passes that were used to secure their freedom. After her master died, Granson was sold to another slaveholder in Mississippi. Since educating slaves was largely prohibited in the South, Granson continued her efforts to educate slaves by holding secret classes at midnight in a back alley cabin. She taught small groups of students at a time, and when she had taught them all that she could, she "graduated" them and then began working with a new group of students. Granson's work, however, was not confined to these mid-night classes. She later opened a Sabbath school to accommodate students desiring to study during the day.⁹

Although it was against the law to educate slaves,¹⁰ Granson risked severe punishment or death for her work. Through her resistance, however, she overcame significant obstacles to provide education for hundreds of slaves, to help many of them in their quest for freedom, to inspire changes in the laws of Mississippi, which eventually allowed slaves to educate other slaves,¹¹ and to support the slave community in its efforts to resist slavery.

Since most slaves did not have the benefit of a teacher like Milla Granson, many African slaves, often led by the women in the community, were left to their own devices and incorporated creative approaches to education. Enslaved women often passed on valuable lessons through folktales, stories, prayers, testimonies, sermons, proverbs, the spirituals, and work songs. These lessons were taught in the fields as they labored from sunup to sundown, in the privacy of their living quarters, and in clandestine worship services.¹² Although many slaves taught themselves to read and write, others, as in the case of Milla Granson, learned from sympathetic slaveholders, or their children, and then passed on their knowledge to other blacks.¹³ While it is unknown whether Granson

embraced a particular faith tradition, her story illustrates a deep sense of spirituality, grounded in the belief that all persons are valuable and deserving of freedom. Consequently, her educational practices reveal the importance of resourcefulness, resistance to oppressive systems, communal activism, and empowerment of students and teachers to bring about liberation and social transformation. Indeed, Granson's life embodied a spirituality of teaching.

Olivia Pearl Stokes

In a more contemporary context, Olivia Pearl Stokes (1916-2002), a graduate of Columbia University Teacher's College and Union Theological Seminary in New York and the first African American woman to receive a doctorate in religious education (1952), was an effective educator and social activist at a time when it was not popular for African American women to take on such roles. Grounded in her faith and a sense of liberation for all who are oppressed, Stokes became actively involved in the struggle for justice and human dignity.¹⁴ In the womanist tradition, she was shaped by the wisdom of her mother who instilled within her foundational life lessons of human dignity along with the teachings of her Christian faith.¹⁵ Stokes embodied these teachings throughout her life and thus through her teaching made an important contribution to Christian education in the church and academy. Moreover, her work reflected a holistic approach to education, which incorporated methodology, theology, and real life situations as well as affirmation of black women's experiences and contributions to society.

A gifted teacher, Stokes implemented a variety of teaching methods and techniques, including discussion, experience, travel, and contextualized approaches to education. She believed that dialogue was a way to honor people's life stories and facilitate communication.¹⁶ She also believed in engaging students in a variety of experiences that embrace a vision for the world. She constantly encouraged people, regardless of race, class, gender, or ethnic background, "to come together and have an experience."¹⁷ For Stokes, experiencing other cultures and communities was a way to encourage persons to honor the gifts and graces of other cultures and challenge negative stereotypes and assumptions.

In addition, Stokes advocated travel as a viable component of education. Consequently, she inspired students to participate in travel seminars to gain an understanding and appreciation of people throughout the world.¹⁸ Finally, Stokes promoted contextualized education. Her vision for education in the black church led her to propose a Saturday Ethnic School that stressed the importance of teaching African and African American heritage in the church. The curriculum was grounded in "Black history, Black church history and contemporary issues viewed from the Black perspective."¹⁹ This model of education, which incorporated a variety of artistic expressions, challenged churches to embrace a culturally sensitive approach to education that honors the unique heritage of African American Christianity.

Through her teaching, Stokes worked to eliminate negative stereotypes of African Americans and women by critiquing music, teaching practices, and curriculum resources.

She also challenged religious educators to create materials and approaches that portray African Americans and women in a positive light. Moreover, she fought for all people to be included in leadership and decision-making policies that would empower them and others to transform their churches, schools, and communities. In short, the life, legacy, and contributions of Olivia Pearl Stokes illustrate the role of diverse teaching methods, a commitment to social justice, the importance of cultural sensitivity, and a vision for ecumenical and global involvement as a means of empowering persons through the educational process.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye

Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1934–) is a renowned African theologian, writer, professor, mentor, and “mother of African women’s theologies.” As one of the first African women theologians to write and publish significant works about African women, Oduyoye has worked tirelessly to address numerous issues such as women’s rights, health care, and destructive religious and cultural practices. A groundbreaking theologian and educator who is deeply rooted in the Methodist church tradition, Oduyoye’s teaching and scholarship encompass multiple themes, including liberation theologies; religion and culture; missionary and ecumenical movements; post-colonial Christianity in Africa; women, tradition, and the gospel in Africa; and global concerns. Moreover, as founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (established in 1989), Oduyoye has encouraged African women to research, write, and publish their own books and articles on “African issues” and concerns.

The Circle provides a space for African women to do “communal theology based on their religious, cultural, and social experiences” and engages them in theological dialogue with cultural and religious practices, sacred teachings, and oral traditions that “shape the African context and define the women of this continent.”²⁰ Under Oduyoye’s leadership and influence, the Circle has expanded its mission to address issues of poverty, sexism, racism, cultural practices, and most recently the impact of HIV/AIDS on African women and girls. It has also begun to build broad-based alliances with other groups desiring to stand in solidarity with African women to resist multiple forms of oppression against women.

Bolstered by her faith, Oduyoye boldly speaks out against oppressive systems of patriarchy that exclude women from leadership roles and other aspects of the church, academy, and broader society. She also engages in a serious analysis and critique of African culture exposing not only the positive aspects of the culture, but also the beliefs and practices that have been oppressive to African women.²¹ Oduyoye’s role as a theologian and educator has also afforded her the opportunity to speak out against various forms of violence and she has worked diligently to empower women (and men) to resist such violence.²² To this end, Oduyoye has expanded the work of the Circle by establishing the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological College in Ghana West Africa. The objective of the Institute is “to promote gender-sensitivity and gender justice especially in religion and culture.” The primary aim, therefore, is to transform these elements so that they will be a “life-giving and life-

enhancing factor in women's lives."²³ Oduyoye's contribution to a spirituality of teaching is her insistence on addressing critical contemporary issues in the educational process; an ongoing critique and transformation of culture, religious practices, and oppressive systems; building broad-based coalitions; and empowering women to write their own stories.

A spirituality of teaching within a triple-heritage model of Christian education may provide resources for contemporary Christian education. By examining the life experiences and contributions of Milla Granson, Olivia Pearl Stoke, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye we can explore new approaches to Christian education that are concerned not only with teaching the faith and heritage, but also with equipping congregations to engage in social action. At the heart of this model are the faith journeys of three black women who have seen human suffering and oppression and have spent a lifetime working to eradicate it. Indeed, their journeys exemplify a call to social justice grounded in a deep and abiding faith. The church must learn from these women and others like them. Consequently, the church can no longer be complacent in addressing the challenges facing the African American community. Instead, it must explore new approaches to Christian education that will empower African Americans to deepen their faith while taking an active role in transforming their personal and communal lives. In so doing, the African American church can take the lead in the struggle for justice, wholeness, and transformation.

¹ See Yolanda Y. Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 9–20; see also Yolanda Y. Smith, "I Want to Be Ready! Teaching Christian Education in the African American Experience," in *Teaching African American Religions*, ed. Carolyn M. Jones and Theodore L. Trost (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71–91; Yolanda Y. Smith, "Forming Wisdom through Cultural Rootedness," in *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church*, ed. Anne S. Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 40–56.

² Janet W. Parachin, *Engaged Spirituality: Ten Lives of Contemplation and Action* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 1.

³ Parachin, 1.

⁴ See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13–22.

⁵ See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 36.

⁶ hooks, 15.

⁷ Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 136.

⁸ Cannon, 137–38. In her analysis of womanist pedagogy, Cannon also draws upon Don S. Browning, David Polk, and Ian S. Evison, eds., *The Education of the Practical Theologian: Responses to Joseph Hough and John Cobb's "Christian Identity and Theological Education"* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

⁹ Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1:498.

¹⁰ Joseph V. Crockett, "An African-American Method of Religious Education," *Quarterly Review* 12 (1992): 58–62; James D. Tjms, *The Rise of Religious Education among Negro Baptists* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), 31; Grant S. Shockley, "Christian Education and the Black Church," in *Christian Education Journey of Black Americans: Past, Present, Future*, by Charles R. Foster, Ethel R. Johnson, and Grant S. Shockley (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 3; William Edward Burghardt Dubois, ed., *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903), 7–8; Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 3–4. See also Henry A. Bullock, A

History of Negro Education in the South from 1619 to Present (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

¹¹ Hine, Brown, and Terborg-Penn, 1:498.

¹² Ella Mitchell, "Oral Tradition: Legacy of Faith for the Black Church," *Religious Education* 81, no. 1 (winter 1986): 99–104; Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831–1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 191–205, 207–08.

¹³ Thomas Jones, "How I Learned to Read and Write," in *Steal Away: Stories of the Runaway Slaves*, comp. Abraham Chapman (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 73–80; Mitchell, 104; Woodson, 128–30; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 563–66; James Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember, An Oral History* (New York: Avon Books, 1988), 198.

¹⁴ Yolanda Y. Smith and Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Olivia Pearl Stokes: A Living Testimony of Faith," in *Faith of Our Foremothers: Women Changing Religious Education*, ed. Barbara Anne Keely (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 100–104. An earlier version of this discussion on Olivia Pearl Stokes also appears in my article, "Olivia Pearl Stokes," online entry for the web-based database, *Christian Educators of the 20th Century*, www.ce20.org (2003), 1–21.

¹⁵ Olivia Pearl Stokes, "Faith, Freedom and Fulfillment" (lecture presented at the conference "Feminism, Spirituality and Wholeness: Naming Our Songs," Claremont School of Theology, California, April 20 1985), 3.

¹⁶ Smith and Moore, 109.

¹⁷ Allen J. Moore (interviewer), "Oral History Project: Dr. Olivia Pearl Stokes," videocassette 1 (Claremont, Calif.: Claremont School of Theology, 1985).

¹⁸ Olivia Pearl Stokes, resume (n.d.); Eleanor Lundy, "Olivia Stokes, Noted Civic Leader, Honored at Black Church Education Conference," *American Baptist News Service* (press release, 15 July 1994); Ruth Edmonds Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, 10 vols. (Westport: Meckler, 1991), 9:126.

¹⁹ Olivia Pearl Stokes, "Education in the Black Church: Design for Change," *Religious Education* 69, no. 4 (1974): 440.

²⁰ See "Background to the Circle," *Circle Newsletter* 2–3 (November 2003 & April 2004): 16; and Musimbi Kanyoro, "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle," in *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster, 2002), 15–38.

²¹ See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books).

²² See Mananzan, Mary John, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elsa Tamez, J. Shannon Clarkson, Mary C. Grey, Letty M. Russell, eds. *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books).

²³ "Institute of Women in Religion and Culture," *A Project of Trinity College*, information brochure, 1999.