

## AR ESSAY

### Proposal for an Afro-Centric Curriculum

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In response to the civil disturbances in Los Angeles that grew out of the verdict at the trial of Los Angeles police officers in Simmi Valley I have been asked by a number of religious agencies and groups to speak about racism. In my presentations I have emphasized the presence of cultural biases in the ways in which teachers of religion in colleges, universities and seminaries; and how church school curriculum have perpetuated the ignorance of the contributions of African peoples to the development of Western philosophy and religion. This article is an attempt to put in a more systematic fashion the problems that exist in traditional religious curriculum from an African-centered perspective. My hope is that this will lead to further discussion regarding the role of African culture in the study and teaching of religion.

#### TRADITIONAL POSITION

The foundation of Western ethics and theology has been taught to generations of seminarians and university students, myself one of them, as being antithetical to African-Egyptian thought and practice. Recent work by Afrocentric scholars challenges this perspective, which fails to give accurate information regarding the contributions of African civilization to Western religion and culture. This omission and misinformation has helped solidify the ideology that African religions and philosophy have had little to do with the development of the most treasured notions of Judeo-Christian thought.

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I believe that in most introductory biblical and World Religion classes in seminaries and universities students are seldom taught the complex relationship that existed between African and European civilizations. Students leave these class with the notion that Egypt was the country that the Hebraic people escaped from in order to develop their unique religious and philosophical positions which were to become the foundation of Western thought. Egypt is depicted as the home of paganism, oppression, and idolatry. In contrast Judaism and Christianity are seen as hallmarks of civilization, order, and culture. The religion of the Egyptians thereby serves as the theological antithesis against which the Judeo-Christian faith was formed. This perspective is especially prevalent in Christian Church School materials. Christians are taught to fear and despise African/Egyptian religion as the opposite of monotheism and the true faith.

Egypt is either the source of evil or it is relegated to irrelevance. The study of African Egyptian/Ethiopic civilizations, unlike that of Western Asian Mesopotamian civilizations, are ignored and relegated to Egyptologists in departments of Near Eastern civilization. This situation has not been helped by Egyptologists, who have been engaged in a campaign to separate Egypt from Africa in order to disprove the possibilities that the majestic and sophisticated thought of the Egyptians could have been achieved by an African people (Budge 1977).

Egypt remains shrouded in mystery and degradation. The assumption is that Egypt is a good and sometimes necessary place to visit but one wouldn't want to live there. What is neglected in this perspective is that Egypt served as a major point of origin for the theological, ethical, and scientific knowledge of Western European and Asian people (Jackson).

Egypt itself is never seen in its own right. It serves as the shadowy background in which Jewish and Christian figures shift in and out dependent on historical forces of war and drought. The sojourn in Egypt of the Jewish patriarchs and people, the Exodus, the internment of Jeremiah, and even Jesus and Mark's encounters with Egypt are examples of how Egypt serves as the silent subtext upon which the Jewish and Christian stories were written.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of imagining that biblical and Jewish and Christian apocryphal accounts are sketchy due to a normal wish by a rival to silence Egypt's voice and power, scholars and religious educators have affirmed this negative view of Egypt. This is also true of the scholarship of liberation and feminist theologians, who affirm God's plan of liberation by bas-

<sup>1</sup>A standard text in the field (Bright) represents this approach, which is standard in biblical studies. S.A. Nigosian's *World Faiths* is a marked improvement over earlier comparative religion texts, but it also obscures the antiquity and the African character of Egyptian religion and culture.

ing their claims on the historicity of the Exodus texts. They do not apply the same hermeneutics of suspicion to these texts that they willingly supply to other biblical texts, such as the Pauline texts which seem to support slavery and the degradation of women. Why is it not possible to also understand that these texts are culturally conditioned and therefore seek to represent Egypt as the ultimate enemy of God as a rhetorical device necessary to highlight God's redemptive power? Metaphor is not the same as fact, and what was helpful to the Israelites in the development of their rival nation-state or what was helpful in giving African-American slaves a sense of hope may be less than helpful in constructing a truly liberating theology which is sensitive to modern issues of race and class.

### REVISIONIST AND AFRICAN-CENTERED PERSPECTIVES

This Eurocentric perspective is akin to the silencing that has occurred in the patriarchal renderings of women in the biblical texts. This view has been challenged most recently by the work of Martin Bernal. His *Black Athena* has challenged this relegation of Egyptian civilization to the periphery in classical studies. Bernal demonstrates how the obscuration of the importance of African philosophy and science has only been a recent occurrence in Western scholarship.

Bernal argues that prior to the advent of colonialism European scholarship reflected the fact that ancient Egyptian-Ethiopic civilizations were advanced in their religious and scientific sophistication and ingenuity. He demonstrates that ancient Greek and medieval scholars commonly asserted the superiority and originality of African thought. However, the sociology of knowledge of the colonial period dictated a shift in perspective in which it was necessary for Europeans to valorize other Europeans: the Greeks, as the founders of Western philosophy, while ignoring the facts that the ancient Greeks themselves credited Africans with their knowledge (Bernal).

Bernal argues that the colonial mentality made it necessary to denigrate all things black and African as the colonial mentality needed to establish the superiority of European thought. However, this information is not acknowledged in the halls of academia, and the suggestion that one study the Egyptian sources themselves is seldom made. When "Western thought" is studied, Egypt is not a part of the discourse.

One of the contributions of self-confessed Afrocentric scholars is the revival of the study of Classical Egyptian texts in the African-American community. The so-called Egyptian Book of the Dead, or more accurately, "The Book of Coming Forth By Day," plays a central role in their discourse. This work is useful to revisionist and Afrocentric scholars because it gives a clear and readily accessible idea of the ethical and theological ideas of ancient Egyptian thought. I have found that once my stu-

dents read this text they are better able to understand the relationship between classical African thought and Judeo-Christian thought.

This ancient work, perhaps the most ancient of moral codes, reveals a keen sense of compassion for the poor and needy as a necessary requirement for the rewarding of eternal life. Maulana Karenga has played an important role in reviving these ancient texts for popular use in the African-American cultural nationalist community. It is perhaps unfortunate that Karenga and his Afrocentric colleagues have had little dialogue with African-American theologians and ethicists. This may be changing as more Afrocentric scholars develop more comprehensive black studies programs in universities and colleges (Karenga; Van Sertima).

What is important for this article is that these Afrocentric scholars have identified a sophisticated African-based moral position which is presently silenced by most seminary and university curricula. For instance, the standard teaching in most introductory seminary biblical courses is that the Jewish moral law, better known as the Ten Commandments, is based on the Hammurabi Code. However, even a cursory reading of the Egyptian texts reveal the close relationship between the Mosaic codes and the Book of Coming Forth by Day. Therefore African/Egyptian thought played a crucial and central role in the development of the most cherished values of Western civilization.

Even on the most superficial of levels the idea that Moses was trained in the thought of the Egyptians as a heir of Pharaoh should alert the scholar that the denigration of Egyptian theology and ethics by the biblical writers is based more in the sociology of resistance than in fact. It was, and still is, natural for nations to denigrate the philosophy and practices of their enemies. What is more remarkable is that biblical scholars would accept these negative assumptions about the religion and philosophy of the Egyptians from their sociological enemies without question.

Instead of viewing Hebrew and Christian religion as a synthesis of Egyptian and other Near Eastern thought with a distinctive Hebraic and Christian emphasis, the culture of ancient Egypt has been silenced. This is especially onerous to Afrocentric scholars since many of the ideas and practices of Judaism and Christianity, such as monotheism, a dying and rising Savior, written moral codes, circumcision, etc., were present in the practices and beliefs of African/Egyptian civilizations (Diop; Van Sertima; Budge 1967; Hart).

#### AFRICAN-AMERICAN RELIGION

This state of affairs has also affected the scholarship in the study of African-American religion. Although historians of African-American Christianity have confirmed the African characteristics of African-American religion by demonstrating the African cultural/structural roots of

African-American Christianity, African American theologians have been slow to incorporate these features into their theological perspective. Is it possible for Africans throughout the world to achieve liberation while they still subscribe to notions of Africa as the symbolic "house of bondage?"

Anthropologists of African religion have demonstrated how the ritual practices of Africans reveal sophisticated symbolic practices of redemption and resistance which serve as points of contact between Christian and Traditional African Religions. This perspective must be incorporated into African-American theology if true liberation is to take place (Comaroff, Fernandez, Turner, Walker).

In addition, the historians who have demonstrated the links between African-American Christianity and African traditions have also been affected by their Eurocentric perspective. They have failed to recognize that African religions themselves have cultural and historic relationships to Classical Egyptian-Ethiopic and Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions. Africans who were to become African-Americans were already exposed to many of the concepts of Christianity since many of these were present in their own traditions because Western and Central Africans migrated from the Egyptian/Nubian civilizations.

The idea that African-Americans were converted to Christianity from heathenism does little justice to the complexity or sophistication of African-based religions. West Africans had already developed a monotheistic tradition in their devotion to a High God before the arrival of Islam and Christianity. West Africans were exposed to the monotheistic expression of Islam centuries before the first Christian missionary arrived. Islam was an early interactor with the peoples of West and Central Africa and powerful Islamic kingdoms flourished in West Africa during medieval times (Davidson).

The development of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam on African soil is a subject seldom mentioned in classes in seminaries and universities. The Copts receive little or no mention in most New Testament classes and reading lists. The present situation involving the resettlement of the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia is an example of the ancient and foundational historical contact that Africans have had with these World Religions. It is not without some surprise that my students have reacted when they see news footage of the obvious African heritage in the Islamic leaders of Kuwait and other Middle Eastern nations.

This does not mean that simply because blacks accepted other forms of religion that they ignored their indigenous forms. This African heritage can be seen in the slave, or better yet, the captivity narratives of African-Americans. Africans in America were engaged in a hermeneutic of retrieval as they were encountering religious thought that they had given rise to generations past. Dubois' characterization of African-American religion is an excellent starting point for a more comprehensive historical

understanding of African-American religion (DuBois; Hurston; Genovese; Levine; Raboteau; Matthews).

### PROPOSAL

In the light of the silencing of these sources I propose that seminary and university curricula reflect the changes in recent scholarship by retrieving lost knowledge and return the contributions of African thought to center stage in the Western project. This would include the positive as well as negative contributions of African civilizations.

For instance, this means that the negative reality of Egypt as a hierarchical caste-oriented system be understood as a contributor to the development of some of the biases of Western thought and practice. On the positive side there would be an acknowledgement of the powerful role of women in the political and family life in African civilizations.

I am not advocating a "strong" Afrocentrism in which all things black and African are now glorified. The form of Afrocentrism I advocate is a "critical" form which restores the place of African thought to its proper status. The betrayal that I now feel as a seminary and divinity school-trained theologian from the African-American community is not a necessary consequence. Generations of seminarians, college students, and theologians are under the false impression that Africans were simply the receptacles of knowledge and not its creators. This can be corrected for future generations of students by the creation of an inclusive curriculum.

I ask my colleagues to let the silence end and include the contributions of Africa as they develop curriculum in Western civilization and thought for the benefit of the truth through scholarship that we all seek.<sup>2</sup>

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