From Human Experience to Creative Exchange

Benchmarks of a Pragmatic Theology of African American Religious Experience

> It is absurd to say that religion is a mere belief. You might as well call society a belief, or politics a belief, or civilization a belief. Religion is a life, and can be identified with a belief only provided that belief be a living belief—a thing to be lived rather than said or thought.
> —Charles Sanders Peirce, "What Is Christian Faith?"

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN A long time coming. One significant delay was that as I laid out the plan for these chapters, I found myself greatly dissatisfied with the approach that I was taking—an approach I had learned from my studies in Western philosophy and the philosophy of religion. I initially thought that I would write a philosophical theology more in line with traditional modes of argument on problems: the problem of religious knowledge, the problem of evil and suffering, the problem of God, and the problem of human meaning—the usual line-up. I would then set up figures as straw men and women only to topple them by counterarguments to show just how much they all went wrong and how mine was the better argument. It's a mean reading strategy when you stop to think about it. Yet I continue to think and teach in this manner.

It is the *one–upmanship* game. It goes like this: Plato did "one-up" the talkative Sophists; Aristotle's materialism "up-turned" Plato's idealism; Augustine's sacred theology "took out" the pagans, until St Thomas did Augustine one better, by baptizing Aristotle. The game goes on until Nietzsche knocks them all out, including Kant and Hegel. The one–upmanship

game is quite convenient if one has a taste for the idea of progress in the way of thinking. Yet William James cites one Professor John Grote of Cambridge regarding this manner of thinking: "I wish that people would consider that thought—and philosophy is no more than good and methodical thought—is a matter *intimate* to them, a portion of their real selves . . . that they would *value* what they think, and be interested in it. . . . I can conceive of nothing more noxious for students than to get into the habit of saying to themselves about their ordinary philosophic thought, Oh, somebody must have thought it all before."[1] James himself comments: "Yet this is the habit most encouraged at our seats of learning. You must tie your opinion to Aristotle's or Spinoza's; you must define it by its distance from Kant's; you must refute your rival's view by identifying it with Protagoras's. Thus does all spontaneity of thought, all freshness of conception, get destroyed. Everything you touch is shopworn."

As I began to apply the one–upmanship strategy to African American religious thought, however, I realized that I was not locked into an intellectual contest with strangers or historical figures. Rather, I was engaged in conversations with many contemporary friends and colleagues. I *know* the people I was planning to topple; many are my intellectual cohorts. From the context of intimate conversation partners, the one–upmanship game felt like intellectual snootiness. Therefore, I decided that I wanted to write a different kind of book, one that genuinely reflects the character of my ongoing conversations both in African American religious studies and African American theology. *Creative Exchange* reflects conceptual conversations with partners, some now departed, like Howard Harrod, and many still living. It also displays my own reflexive engagement within African American religious experience.

In writing this book, I could not easily put on the mask of the disinterested critic who enjoys nothing more than carving up concepts and figures for intellectual consumption. I found myself deeply interested in and affected by the materials making up the book's content. This is a critical book insofar as it takes seriously the ways that African American religious thinkers conceptually frame the meaning of race and religious experience; however, it is also constructive insofar as I put my own thinking into the hermeneutics of African American religious experience. This book is a constructive theology. It is not historical research on black religion such as Charles H. Long has offered in his *Significations: Signs, Symbols, Images in the Interpretation of Religion*,[3] although the influence of his hermeneutical phenomenology permeates much of this book. Furthermore, *Creative Exchange* is not a comparative study on the variety of African American religious traditions such as

Anthony B. Pinn's *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*.[4] However, I am greatly indebted to Pinn's theological interest in making difference a controlling logic in his account of African American religious traditions. Like Pinn, I am also committed here to enlarging the account of African American religious experience beyond near totalizing interpretations bound by the black church tradition and black liberation theology. Moreover, this book is not a comprehensive study of the material, ritual, and performative practices of conjuration in black religion such as Theophus H. Smith brilliantly offers in *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (1994).[5] Yet the intersections of black religion and culture studies provide a background condition for my constructive theology.

Rather, the following quote by Tyron Inbody best captures the basic logic running throughout this book:

> Experience is never "pure experience" (individualistic, subjective, original, underived, autonomous, and foundational). It is always derived from, shaped, and interpreted in a social context, both a natural environment of interrelationships and interdependence (nature) and a cultural environment of language, symbol, and myth (tradition). Neither exists without the other and each is reciprocal with the other. Language arises and develops in the context of an organism encountering a complex environment in experience, and tradition shapes and reshapes the experience of an organism in its (natural, social and cosmic) environment through language, symbol, and myth. The organism does not have a world without experience and culture interacting to construct a world of organism and environment. The resources of faith convey through the interaction of experience and culture the depth of relationships within the natural environment which create, judge, redeem, and fulfill the individual and the society.[6]

At its deepest level of insight, this book is about relationality constructed through the lens of a pragmatic theology. Through this lens thought and action, organism and environment, experience and culture refract a unity of interdependence and creative exchange that keep life open to the event of Beloved Community.

More strictly, then, *Creative Exchange* is a philosophical approach in which the constructive, innovative deployment of concepts themselves—such as experience, ambiguity, the grotesque, creative exchange, creative conflict, difference, race, God, world, community, and more—do the work of interpretation, criticism, and directing possibilities toward openness. Although organized around typical themes in the philosophy of religion (sources of religious insight, evil and suffering, God and faith, and community and

fulfillment), these topics are interpreted under the symbolic force that race creates in the religious experiences of African American people.

Drawing on Edward Farley's *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation*,[7] I understand race to be a deep symbol that arises from the interhuman depth structures of human communities and functions as a deeply rooted category in the stock of knowledge that contributes to social meaning in Western culture. As a deep symbol, race has the *feel* of being a priori, but in reality it is a historical construct that regulates our interhuman relations, though not always toward malicious forms of racism. Indeed, race may also enable forms of community bound by filial care and interests. As with all our deep symbols, race too is fallible because it is vulnerable to historical change and corruptibility. As Long, Pinn, and Smith show, the representational force of race is located in a master narrative that identifies and defines social action in human communities. *Creative Exchange* conceives of forms of relations in African American religious experience that are resistant to any essentialist strategy for reading the modes of difference that constitute African American life.

Although this book draws heavily on the insights of African American religious thinkers, I make a wide use of philosophical resources from American philosophy and religious thought and American empirical theology for the construction of a pragmatic theology of African American religious experience. *Creative Exchange* is consistent with what I put forward in my earlier book, *Beyond Ontological Blackness,* as a religious criticism that is both iconoclastic and emancipatory. The basic insight of this present book may be stated thus: When African American religious experience is fundamentally understood as relational, processive, open, fluid, and irreducible, creative exchange keeps our interpretations and understandings of the meaning and significance of our particular religious experiences open to forms of enlargement that transcend the limits of our particular faith communities and actualizes in the here and now concrete instances, moments, or creative events of what Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Thurman called "the Beloved Community." Beloved Community is concrete in every event where creative exchange is realized.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IMPULSE

After reading a draft of this book, a friend told me that in doing so she came to know me more intimately than in all the personal conversations we have had over ten years of friendship. I think her comment reflects what others have told me in the decade since I published *Beyond Ontological Blackness.* At its most dismissive, the comment has been something

like this: "Who is . . . Victor Anderson?!" —as in, "Who is this upstart?!"—reflecting the reader's dismissal of my criticism of black theology as audacious. Others, trying to find ways to situate my work, asked me, "Who is your audience?" Still others asked, "Where is your voice in the argument?" However such questions were raised, readers noted that absent from my work was the autobiographical impulse. If this is a criticism of my prior works, it's a fair one.

Two things may account for the absence of any autobiographical impulse in my previous books. First, I was trained in the classical tradition of Western philosophical arguments where the argument itself carries the weight of persuasion. In general I am still deeply committed to this way of thinking and writing, though many of my readers have shown frustration with such commitment. Anthony Weston's *A Rulebook for Argument* and P. T. Geach's *Reason and Argument* have guided my reading and writing—short books that underscore my concern whether our propositions and conclusions have good, valid, and sound reasoning supporting them. So I suspect that it is this philosophical account of rigor that lies behind my silencing the autobiographical impulse in my own writings.

Second, I have always been suspicious of folks who require some articulation of an author's social location as a basis for judging effective scholarly writing. I have not always been sure just what kind of work these kinds of confessions are supposed to do. They may be a way of couching arguments against anticipated ideological charges that the argument is patriarchal, elitist, or displays racial privilege. In this way, the writer acknowledges the charges and can now get on with the argument. On a benign level, one's social location may establish solidarities with particular pockets of readers whose identities are defined by race, class, sex, or sexual orientation loyalties. Yet I also suspect that the reader requires my social location in order to determine whether I have anything to offer her or him before the argument is dismissed on ad hominem (or circumstantial ad hominem) grounds. For example: "His privileged elite education is why he says the things he says.""He's been around all them white folks and all he reads are mostly dead white philosophers and theologians." "He's an angry black gay male and that is why he *comes out* [pun intended] the way he does." Whatever requires the social location of the writer as a basis for judging effective academic writing, every writer has to determine for himself or herself just what he or she owes the reader or the audience. As I see it, too much information is as much a turn-off as is too little.

Now that I have articulated my suspicions, I think that when it comes to matters of experience, and religious experience in particular, the autobiographical impulse has a legitimate place. In the case of this book, the nature

of the topic itself and my intention to establish intersubjective understanding between my conversation partners or interlocutors and myself warrant autobiographical exchanges. In other words, my use of autobiographical exchanges throughout the various chapters is a reflexive requirement of my attempt to critique pragmatically African American religious experience. I regard experience to be a unity before it is ever differentiated by categories or ideas. This means that human beings are entailed in that unity as a subject with a biography, a subject developing into a personality with its interests, goals, loves, desires, and basic needs. This is the narrative quality of experience.

Although experience is not reducible to its narrative quality, there is no account of experience that is biographically free if, as I argue in this book, a pragmatic theology of African American religious experience is committed to modes of interpretation that are open to the widest ranges of human experience. This includes the narrative structure of experience. In his discussion on the narrative constructions of individual and collective identities, Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that narratives "provide loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping our plans of life. Collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their stories."[8] However, Appiah does not want to reduce individual experience to the structural force of narrative. He says:

> So we should acknowledge how much our personal histories, the stories we tell of where we have been and where we are going, are constructed, like novels and movies, short stories and folktales, within narrative conventions. Indeed, one of the things that popular narratives (whether filmed or televised, spoken or written) do for us is to provide models for telling our lives. At the same time, part of the function of our collective identities—of the whole repertory of them that a society makes available to its members—is to structure possible narratives of the individual self.[9]

Experience is disclosed by basic irreducible yet complexly integrating structures of physicality, temporality, spaciality, sociality, and basic human senses or affectivities. This ontological schema is not meant to be exhaustive. Nevertheless, it leaves our interpretations of African American religious experience open to the widest ranges of our *experiencing* of the world, as both collective and individual identities, by resisting interpretations of identities that are oriented toward reductivism and antithetical to ambiguity. Ambiguity keeps experience itself open to what William James called the

MORE (the conception of which I retrieve here) beyond its narrative qualities. In what follows in the remainder of this introduction, I want to focus on certain intellectual benchmarks or unit ideas on which I construct my pragmatic theology of African American religious experience. First, I reflect on the relationship between experience and the grotesque or ambiguity. Second, I reflect on pragmatic naturalism and religious experience. Last, I discuss the concept of creative exchange.

Experience and the Grotesque

It was my own interest in the concept of experience in black theology that motivated me to write this book. I became invested in this concept when I first read James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* as an undergraduate student in history and theology at Trinity Christian College. Cone made black experience the point of departure for the black liberation theology movement, saying:

> Black Theology must take seriously the reality of black people—their life of suffering and humiliation. This must be the point of departure for all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk. When that man is black and lives in a society permeated with white racist power, he can speak of God only from the perspective of the socio-economic and political conditions unique to black people. Though the Christian doctrine of God must logically precede the doctrine of man, Black Theology knows that black people can view God only through black eyes that behold the brutalities of white racism. To ask them to assume a "higher" identity by denying their blackness is to require them to accept a false identity and to reject reality as they know it to be.[10]

The quotation is striking not only for what it says about the meaning of black theology and black experience, but also for what it does not say. For instance, is black experience fundamentally suffering and humiliation? What is it about these two aspects of experience that make them prolegomena to "all God-talk"? What are we to make of this little word *all*? Is black experience unique with respect to socioeconomic and political conditions? What does it mean to say that black people *can only* view God through black eyes turned on white supremacy? If black experience transcends *blackness,* is this really to accept a false identity or a rejection of reality as it is known by black people?

Behind such questions are my deep suspicions about the meaning of experience itself in black theology. As I read it, experience is used as a cultural signifier in which culture itself achieves a totalizing effect. In *Beyond*

Ontological Blackness, I questioned what I saw as a reductivist conception of black experience typified as *ontological blackness*. My argument was this:

> Most of Cone's problems center around the category of symbolic blackness. Cone's problems are matters of internal contradiction. First, black theology, as Cone formulated it, risks self-referential inconsistency when it sees itself radically oppositional to white racism and white theology. Because Cone collapses metaphysics into ontology, blackness is reified into a totality or a unity of black experience. At the same time, blackness is regarded as symbolic; so that anyone who can participate in its meaning can be said to be black. However, black theology exceptionally circumscribes the meaning of symbolic blackness in terms of black oppression and suffering.
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> The difficulty arises here: (a) Blackness is a signification of ontology and corresponds to black experience. (b) Black experience is defined as the experience of suffering and rebellion against whiteness. Yet, (c) both black suffering and rebellion are ontologically created and provoked by whiteness as a necessary condition of blackness. (d) Whiteness appears to be the ground of black experience, and hence of black theology and its new black being. Therefore, while black theology justifies itself as radically oppositional to whiteness, it nevertheless requires whiteness, white racism, and white theology for the self-disclosure of its new black being and its legitimacy. In this way, black theology effectively renders whiteness identifiable with what is of ultimate concern. "Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not being," says Tillich. . . . In black theology, blackness has become a totality of meaning. It cannot point to any transcendent meaning beyond itself without also fragmenting.[11]

More than a decade of dialogue has occurred since I made this argument, during which I have benefited from conversations and debates with self-identified black liberation theologians regarding it. In hindsight, I may have overstated my criticism for the sake of foregrounding forms of difference that render any essentialist conception of race or blackness problematic by distorting the richness and worlds of difference that make up the lives and purposes of African Americans. A decade later, however, I remain rather suspicious about the ways African American experience is typified in black and womanist theologies. To be sure, I have witnessed great attention among black liberation theologians and womanist theologians to move beyond any ontologizing strategies that essentialize black experience. Yet I am still suspicious of their persistent defining of black experience as the experience of suffering, humiliation, struggle, survival, and resistance. I argue in this book

that the manner in which we take up the concept of experience itself will determine what gets emphasized as defining aspects of African American religious experience, and that experience itself has all too often been the unexamined language controlling African American theology, the exception being perhaps African American process theologians.

Readers will note that as I talk about experience and religious experience I show a preference for the signifier *African American* over *black* (although I will sometimes slip into the latter). My preference is for a signifier that connotes contexts of experience that are structured by the ambiguities of difference over sameness. The signifier entails great realms of ambiguity that have historically defined the consciousness of African American history as it is based on the historical reality of the transatlantic slave trade and cross-cultural pollinations by conquest and contact between North Atlantic slave traders and missionaries and African peoples. The signifier points to forms of ambiguity that were shaped by the broken promises of the reconstruction and the bifurcation of consciousness that W. E. B. Du Bois called a twoness, a double consciousness maintained by racial segregation. A century after being first penned, Du Bois's rhetoric has not lost its existential bite:

> Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.
>
> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[12]

The signifier *African American* leaves my interpretation of African American culture and religious experience open to forms of freedom (political, social, moral, spiritual, and expressive) that arise from the worlds of difference (class, family, educational, regional, religious, sexual, political, and more) that make up the African American community.

In my understanding of experience in general and African American reli-
gious experience in particular, the grotesque or ambiguity is a controlling
unit idea or benchmark.[13] In *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, I offered an aes-
thetic critique of racial essentialism by the disrupting significations of the
grotesque over the simple, fixed, singular, and unchanging. There I was draw-
ing on Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of the concept, in his descrip-
tion of the Dionysian personality, which he describes this way:

> It is impossible for the Dionysian man not to understand any sug-
> gestion of whatever kind, he ignores no signal from the emotions,
> he possesses to the highest degree the instinct for understanding and
> divining, just as he possesses the art of communication to the highest
> degree. He enters into every skin, into every emotion; he is continu-
> ally transforming himself.[14]

The grotesque ought not to be thought of as an opposition between
two diametrically opposed sensibilities. Yet it has to do with sensibilities that
are apparently oppositional, such as attraction and repulsion or pleasure and
pain. However, the grotesque seeks neither the negation nor mediation of
these sensibilities. It leaves them ambiguous and unresolved by negation or
mediation. Philip Thomson describes the grotesque thus:

> The most consistently distinguished characteristic of the grotesque
> has been the fundamental element of disharmony, whether this is
> referred to as conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or con-
> flation of disparates. It is important that this disharmony has been
> seen, not merely in the work of art as such, but also in the reaction it
> produces and (speculatively) in the creative temperament and psycho-
> logical make-up of the artist.[15]

The disharmony or ambiguity may be compared best to the optical
games "Duck or Rabbit," "Man's Face or Nude," or the infamous "Wife or
Mother-in-Law" drawings. Consider these optical games: duck or rabbit and
girl's face or saxophonist.[16]

In the grotesque, consciousness and judgment are a play of the imagina-
tion. They are the play of senses, contour, tactility, detail, shades, light, and the
mechanics of focusing the eye one way or another to bring to judgment the
resolution of disjunctive reasoning. One is asked to decide either/or, this or
that, one way or another. In the two drawings here, one is invited into the
play, a certain dance between the eyes, the movement of the head, physically
placing oneself in different relations to the image. Each move of the dance,
including staring and rocking one's head side to side or back and forth,

brings into focused decision the resolution of the ambiguous image. In reality, however, the images are not reducible to disjunctive judgments: duck or rabbit, face or saxophonist. The grotesque leaves each image an unresolved ambiguity that resists such reductive reasoning and judgment. As Frederick Burwick says, "The grotesque, then, involves an elaborate multistability of manner and matter. This was Friedrich Schlegel's reason for defining the grotesque as a mode of irony, for he recognized in the grotesque a challenge to the mind's instinctive endeavor to synthesize."[17]
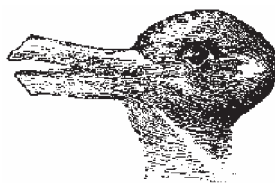
In a schematic manner, first, the grotesque recovers and leaves unresolved prior and basic sensibilities such as attraction/repulsion and pleasure/pain differentials. Second, the nonresolution of these aesthetic and cognitive senses renders the objects perceived and our perception of the object confused or ambiguous as in the two drawings. Third, these unresolved ambiguities may leave possibilities open for creative ways of taking an object or subject; for in the grotesque, an object is, at the same time, other than how it appears when one contour or another is accented. Fourth, the grotesque disrupts the penchant for cognitive synthesis by highlighting the absurd and sincere, the comical and tragic, the estranged and familiar, the satirical and playful, and normalcy and abnormality.[18] It is profoundly oriented toward the interplay or creative interchange of difference.

What work does the grotesque play in the context of this book? The unresolved ambiguities of African American experience leave interpreters open to the creative interplay of an undifferentiated unity of experience that comes into focus only by the activity of squeezing the eye one way or another. It sees African American experience as being open to the *feel* of unresolved joys and laughter; open to the experiencing of the comedic and tragic in experience; open to the interplay of sameness and difference. Ambiguity is *the feel of experience* before it is captured, frozen, and domesticated by our clear, distinct, exceptional racial descriptions and our totalized frames of reference for understanding and interpreting African American religious experience.

The pragmatic concept of experience has been most determinant in my interpretation of African American religious experience.[19] Experience is a complex environmental unity in which nature and logic, thought and life, purpose and action are together embedded in creative exchange. William James discusses the unity of experience this way:

> Experience is a process that continually gives us new material to digest. We handle this intellectually by the mass of beliefs of which we find ourselves already possessed, assimilating, rejecting, or rearranging in different degrees. Some of the apperceiving ideas are recent acquisitions of our own, but most of them are common-sense traditions of the race. There is probably not a common-sense tradition, of all those which we now live by, that was not in the first instance a genuine discovery, an inductive generalization like those more recent ones of the atom, of inertia, of energy, or reflex action, or of fitness to survive. The notions of one Time and of one Space as single continuous receptacles; the distinction between thoughts and things, matter and mind; between permanent subjects and changing attributes; the conception of classes with sub-classes within them; the separation of fortuitous from regular caused connections; surely all these were once definite conquests made at historic dates by our ancestors in their attempts to get the chaos of their crude individual experiences into a more shareable and manageable shape. They proved of such sovereign use as *denkmittel* [thought materials] that they are now a part of the very structure of our mind. We cannot play fast and loose with them. No experience can upset them. On the contrary, they apperceive every experience and assign it to its place.[20]

Like the ambiguities of the grotesque, the unity of experience is also an antireductivist principle in my pragmatic theology. John Edwin Smith's account of the unity of experience is helpful:

> Experience, understood as the funded result of many encounters with what is presented, is too rich and varied in content to be adequately described by any one predicate. There is no descriptive term comprehensive enough in meaning to express the entire content of experience as such. Experience is of events and things, of hopes and fears, of disappointments and expectations, of persons and places; in short, experience must be open to everything that is, and we are never justified in anticipating its content by assigning to it some specific and differential character purporting to express the sort of thing it must contain.[21]

This conception of experience in my pragmatic theology of African American religious experience keeps interpretive judgments open to play, to the dance, within the grotesqueries or ambiguities of experience itself.

PRAGMATIC NATURALISM AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Inasmuch as the unit ideas of ambiguity and the unity of experience fund my pragmatic theology, pragmatic naturalism frames my metaphysical point of view. In *Pragmatic Theology*,[22] I proposed that pragmatic naturalism is the *metaphysical* aspect of pragmatism. By metaphysical thinking, I simply mean the ways that we picture the world, and for a pragmatic naturalist such as myself, the picture is one in which parts of experience are related to other parts and then related to wholes that are then related to larger wholes within a comprehensive picture of the world. For instance, our galaxy is related to other galaxies. Our construal of observable galaxies enters into our latest theories of what holds things together or what gives us the appearance that things are held together. Pragmatic naturalism takes the widest ranges of human experience and relates them to larger, expansive wholes. Pragmatic naturalism will not rest well with any radical positivistic mandate to relegate human subjectivities to the unknowable while making reality of only the physical fields and properties of experience. As Maurice Blondel puts it so well in his classic book, *Action* (1893):

> The field of becoming is without assignable limit; and new perspectives will always open up, with new theories that will not exhaust the object to be known since they constitute it in part. What seems chimerical to claim becomes scientific truth; external finality itself recovers once again the characteristic of definite certitude that only internal finality had maintained. Man [*sic*] is a "microcosm," *summa mundi et compendium* (a summation of the world and a compendium), the summary of experiences, of all the inventions and of all the ingenuities of nature, an extract and an original product of the whole; the universe concentrates all its rays in him [*sic*]. Subjective life is the substitute and the synthesis of all other phenomena whatever they may be.[23]

From the point of view of its internal subjectivity, the world is organic, processive, open, unfinished, and open to novelty. In chapters 1 and 4, this metaphysical picture is constructed in the context of African American relational theology. Eugene Fontinell's account of pragmatic naturalism is helpful here:

> The new always emerges from or grows out of what is already in existence; however, it cannot be understood as simply a particularization of an essence that is eternal or absolutely permanent. The processive world [is] envisioned by radically novel events and realities . . . which are not simply the actualization of pre-existence potentialities whether such realities are ultimately located in something called nature or in the reality of God.[24]

The world ought not to be thought of as only a signification of our small planet, Earth. World is the naming of God as radically inclusive, relational, interdependent, interactive, and an interfunctional whole. The principle of *enlargement* is my way of coming to terms, quite literally, with the world. This principle forms a basic tenet in *Creative Exchange* as it defines the end, goal, good, and value of creative exchange throughout each chapter. The principle has a nonreductive emphasis in our reflections on the world, its processes, patterns, and powers. It "seeks to account for human experience with no reference to the otherworldly and to discover the meaning available within human experience itself."[25]

It was this insight into pragmatism and religious thought that led me to the works of two American empirical theologians, Henry Nelson Wieman and James M. Gustafson. Through them I sought to relate constructive theology to pragmatic naturalism. It was Gustafson's pragmatism and account of theocentric piety that most influenced my account of religious experience. And it was Wieman's notion of God as creative interchange that influenced my normative commitments. Together they brought balance to my pragmatic theology.

Gustafson thinks of experience as a unity that is prior to theological reflections. He says: "Whatever claims are made for reason, theological arguments for the existence of God are based upon human experiences of other persons, of nature, and of society. Both revelation and reason are human reflections on human experiences."[26] Experience is a holistic background condition. Whatever experiences we claim, they are given as a whole web of relations before they are conceptually isolated, catalogued, and become the subject of discourse. This is what Gustafson means when he insists that general human experience is prior to distinctions.[27]

Gustafson is in agreement with John Edwin Smith when he conceives of the unity of experience as basic but not some sort of "transcendental limit." The unity of experience has a critical immanence within the context of social and historical understanding. Although a holistic background condition of meaning, experience is always social and historical. In agreement with Smith, Gustafson says: "It is a process of interaction between persons,

between persons and natural events, and between persons and historical events."[28] The social is the interaction of a self with an other and others in experience. The meaning and significance of human experience is continually being assessed in communities that share common objects of interests and common concepts, symbols, and theories. Human experience is immanently intersubjective and communicative so that if there is knowledge of God at all, it is human knowledge. It is knowledge mediated through human experience of one's own, of a community, or of another person.[29]

The process of differentiation immediately arises in talk about the unity of experience. Gustafson acknowledges that the process is often exaggerated so that hierarchies are created out of human experience and experience itself becomes fragmented and compartmentalized. What result are theories of experience that are radically reductionistic, atomistic, strictly utilitarian, and individualistic. Socially such theories result in anthropocentrism and individualism. Such theories of experience that bifurcate and compartmentalize experience and reality are to be rejected because they fail to take into themselves the reality of finitude that meets us at every turn in our experiencing of the world.

Gustafson offers a grotesque account in which the experience of God may well be perceived as a religious experience, but it may just as well be perceived as an aesthetic or moral experience. Unlike disjunctive reasoning, moral experience may not be strictly differentiated from religious experience; however, this does not mean that there are no possibilities of isolating any genuinely distinctive discourses on the various aspects of human experience. For theology is based on the possibility that genuine religious experience can be isolated in terms of natural piety. The word *piety* denotes the *senses*, the affectivities, through which the overwhelming power(s) that persons meet in their experiencing the world are apprehended and relate human beings to those powers. Gustafson says that "our 'senses' are senses *of*; what they are senses of stems from our relation to others, the world around us, and in the religious context, to God."[30] It is through social interaction that the senses gain specifically religious meanings.

Religious experience is social, and the affections that are associated with it are prior to our naming them. They are first evoked by human relationships with others. Others are not to be taken as designating only human persons but also as including nonhuman others. The religious affections are grounded in the experiences of nature, of human communities, and of human culture and actions.[31] They are deeply relational.

In human experience with others, certain senses are evoked and sustained, and from these senses we give theological interpretations. Gustafson

identifies basic senses that frame his theology. They are the senses of dependency and trust, obligation, remorse and repentance, possibility and hope, and the sense of direction from which we project our future ideals. Each of the senses is relational, and each relates to the other, evoking them in terms of an awareness of another, a disposition to act in particular ways, an attitude of adjustment in line with the dignity of the object, and affection toward the object.[32] These religious senses are not unnatural or supernatural but are interrelated with many other aspects of human experience. Although these senses are natural and exhibit a certain universality, they are not perceived immediately to be religious. They are understood to be religious as a consequence of the social interactions of persons in communities of shared experience.

In particular religions, shared experiences are explained and interpreted by means of the internal resources of languages and symbols that a community uses to communicate the meaning and significance of its experiences of some one or complex of overwhelming presences, powers, processes, and patterns. In chapter 3, Gustafson's perspective of the relation of shared meaning within communities to the interpretation of faith and suffering will be most central in my defense of redemptive suffering in African American religious experience. A pragmatic theology is based on the possibility of identifying genuine religious experiences that correlate to the whole of human experience. Theology is always a community affair. "From a variety of communities, information necessary for individuals and groups to engage properly in ethical reflections is derived. In these communities, mutual understandings are gathered, differences in points of views are expressed, perspectives and interpretations from a broad range of gifted members are enlisted, and consciences are formed when informed reasoning is brought to clarity."[33] These possibilities are what Wieman calls *creative interchange* and I refer to as *creative exchange*. Theology relates the religious affections to the power(s) bearing down on us and sustaining us and the ways in which human life is ordered within the nexus of natural and social processes and patterns, says Gustafson.[34] God simply is the world—its powers, processes, and patterns into which we have our being and to which we are all related in creative exchange.

CREATIVE EXCHANGE

Wieman is one of the more significant figures of the twentieth century to advance the prospect for an empirical account of religious experience. Yet it is his construal of the world as the source of human good that informs the normative vision of my pragmatic theology. Wieman's theology and

ethics are complex, not so much in terms of difficulty but with respect to the many turns they take through experience. In the most simple terms, Wieman thinks of God as that structure that sustains and promotes the maximization of value, that increases, enlarges, and progressively integrates human good. God is the infinite possibility and concrete actuality of value in experience. Gustafson's theology emphasizes finitude and human limits within the world. Wieman's theology emphasized radical transcendence within the world. For him, every relation entails values, goods, and goals. God maximally relates our goods, ends, purposes, and values toward insuring their mutual support and enhancement.

If it is the case that only our instrumental and extrinsic goods or ends are satisfied, then our lives cannot be said to be maximally fulfilled. All of our attempts at fulfilling these values issue in conflict. As I argue in chapter 5, the values internal to our homes and churches enter into conflict with other members of our society who also seek to actualize values internal to their homes and churches. There is nothing intrinsic in our instrumental and extrinsic values that make them the goods of all. For as Aristotle suggests, even in what we consider to be evil acts, the agent has some good or end in mind. In Wieman's ethics, conflict is also a good; it is an intrinsic value in our experiencing the world. Conflict is necessary for the clarifying of goods, ends, and values that enlarge our horizons of meaning in order to make for a life that is livable with others, including nonhuman others. God is the source of this human good. This processive integration of good, Wieman names *creative interchange.* He says:

> What makes for the greatest good when required conditions are present? Is it God? That is a word I shrink from using because it carries so many different meanings for different people. But there is a creativity in human experience. It begins with the newborn infant, expanding the valuing consciousness to the widest and deepest range of values which conditions permits. But what are values? As I use the word, I mean goal-seeking activities expanding in range and mutual support, both in the life of the individual and in mutual support between individuals and peoples. No individual can expand the range of his goal-seeking activities of his associates and his culture and transforming them to fit the demands of his own unique individuality. This absorbing of the goal-seeking activities of others and transforming them to meet the demands of the unique individuality of each participant, I call creative interchange. It does three things all at the same time. It expands the valuing consciousness of each. It widens and deepens mutual support between individuals and peoples. It develops the unique individuality of each person.[35]

God is the naming of creative interchange. God names the conditions of its possibility as concrete actuality and the processes, patterns, and powers that make for the maximization of all relative values and goals. Creative interchange is the basis for the forms of enlargement that relativize the instrumental goods that define our particular communities. As I argue in this book, creative interchange also substantiates, in however limited ways, Beloved Community. Wieman says: "Creative interchange is the only ultimate and valid basis of community because it is the one ultimate source of our humanity, also the way leading to the greatest good to be attained by human kind. It makes possible disagreement and diversity without hate or fear, without retaliation or estrangement, because the demands of creative interchange, are contributory to the good of each."[36] Creative interchange is not only the source of human good; for Wieman, it is also an ultimate human commitment.

> The human race cannot long survive on this planet with the increase of power and complex interdependence unless the ultimate foundations of community be shifted from culture, race, class, nation or alliance of nations and from any one or all of the world religions and is firmly established on that creative interchange which has created the humanity in every individual, from the first days of infancy, no matter to what culture, race, class, nation, or traditional religion he may belong. Creative interchange cannot save us unless we make a religion of it. That means to give our ultimate commitment to it, accept it as the sovereign good of our lives, the source, guide and goal of our existence.[37]

Both Gustafson and Wieman bring a sense of balance to my pragmatic theology. Gustafson provides a sobering sense of reality to my understanding of human possibilities and actualities. He installs on my pragmatic theology the conviction that, at every turn, we are met with finitude and limits. The world—its powers, processes, and pattern—may not cooperate with our human endeavors to satisfy our wants and needs. Here, however, Gustafson and Wieman greatly differ. While admitting the reality of transcendence into his theology, Gustafson emphasizes the sense of limits. He warns that humility may be the most appropriate sense of piety before the powers bearing down on us, perhaps conditioning our own demise.

Gustafson's position is not without either its problems or critics.[38] I am not as bothered as some critics have been concerning whether his account of experience smacks of some kind of transcendental phenomenology or an ever-receding into the background condition against which to ground religious claims against the relativity of historical formations of theology

within particular religious communities.[39] In what I have said above and elsewhere, such a reading does not square with a close reading of Gustafson's position.[40] Moreover, I am not particularly worried that Gustafson appears to be overly dependent on the empirical and natural sciences in revising traditional understandings of God in his theocentric ethics.[41] Although he draws heavily on the empirical sciences for his constructive theology, Gustafson insists that the relation between theology and the empirical sciences is a critical one and not one of dependency. He also acknowledges that the empirical sciences are as socially contested in theories and findings as are Christian theologies. Gustafson's position to the empirical sciences is far more nuanced than critics may allow.[42]

It is Gustafson's theory of consent that I find most problematic, however. While I appreciate his radical critique of anthropocentrism in theology, Gustafson's theory of consent proposes that we consent to the power(s) bearing down on us, powers that may also bring about our own demise, and consent to the claim that God may not always have human flourishing as God's end. Such a theory profoundly confounds the meaning and significance of worship, adoration, but especially prayer in the Christian tradition. In his attempt to minimize anthropocentrism, he says too little concretely about the place, goods, and ends of human flourishing in his theocentric ethics. In chapter 4, I try to resolve this problem of prayer within my own pragmatic theology of African American religious experience. However, Gustafson's realism regarding the place of the human in his theocentric ethics and his account of ethics as mostly an intellectual, deliberative activity left me turning to Wieman for a more concrete appreciation of human possibilities to effect creative exchange and contribute to substantive forms of flourishing and fulfillment within community.

Wieman's account of creative interchange balances Gustafson's piety of pessimism. He provides me with a normative outlook in my interpretation of our interhuman encounters. Like Gustafson, he is also a theologian of radical immanence. God is no wholly transcendent reality, much less a person. Rather, God names the sources of all those concrete moments in experience in which the limits of our self-descriptions, immediate situations, of our attempts to satisfy our particular goals, are enlarged toward forms of community that increase our sense of human purposes beyond the race, family, and nation, and beyond group interests. The world concretely—its processes, powers, and patterns—makes for these possibilities.

Wieman's position also is problematic in a number of ways. Besides an overly optimistic account of human possibilities toward the enlargement of

value, his relational value theory is itself rather reductionistic. Here, value itself just might as well be equated with God, since it is the maximization of value that is of supreme commitment. The American empirical theologian Tyron Inbody reported to me that while Wieman was at Chicago, when referring to his doctrine of God as creative interchange, the standing joke among students and colleagues was, "Henry, which is it this time?" This is a criticism that has long plagued Wieman since H. Richard Niebuhr first charged it in a 1931 critical essay:

> The American theologian or philosopher appears to abstract individual experience unduly from its historic context and to be inadequately aware of the cultural matrix out of which his experience is born. Abstracting the experiencer from his cultural conditions, he ascribes to the content of experience a universal availability and validity which it does not possess since it is in fact relative to a particular historical nexus. The result is either the universalization of Christian theology, which is regarded as available for all rational human beings because they are rational and human, or . . . the reduction of the content of theology to that which is abstracted from all particular historical connection to the consensus of all religions or to a natural theology gained by a process of inference from man's universal experience of nature, thought and morality.[43]

Value appears to be a projection of the subjectivity of human subjects. How, then, does one render value universal beyond subjective forms of appraisal? Again Niebuhr:

> Being inadequately critical and relativistic in its analysis of religious experience, American realism appears to discover the absolute within the relative more readily than seems permissible; hence it fails to recognize the urgency and difficulty of discovering the absolute and to appreciate the peculiarity of Christianity as revelation or of faith as a divine *tour de force* by which the relative is transcended.[44]

From Niebuhr's position, it is the relativism of values that raises questions about Wieman's relational value theory.

Closely tied to this problem is that Wieman's theology and ethics appear radically anthropocentric, especially when compared to Gustafson's. Here, value holds for human purposes, goods, ends, flourishing, and fulfillment. Wieman's locus of creative interchange is human good, and he is optimistic that when human good has become a matter of humans' ultimate commitment, then humans will maximally flourish. Given this moral vision

of creative interchange, one has to wonder, Why use God-talk at all?—
for it is value itself that maximizes and enlarges value. There is something
greatly unsatisfying in Wieman's relational value theory that, as in the case
of Gustafson, raises questions about the meaning and significance of wor-
ship, adoration, praise, and thanksgiving in religious experience. I am left
to ask just how satisfying such a minimal account of divine transcendence
communicates in its own exchange with normative, aesthetic, and practical
performances in religious experience. Notwithstanding the importance of
these questions, I nevertheless find both Gustafson's and Wieman's theologies
and ethics attractive in our contemporary context of theological ethics so
preoccupied with or nearly totalized by power and identity politics and the
particularity of tradition, story, and narrative. In both theologians, I find the
kindred spirit of unrepentant liberals. Together, they substantiate my belief in
the possibility of and concrete actualization of Beloved Community.

Conclusion

To conclude, *black* experience as I first read it in black theology and then in
womanist theology has remained a major basis for my critical reflections on
African American religious experience. I realized early in my college and
seminary years that I could not be a black liberation theologian if it meant
bracketing the grotesqueries, the unresolved ambiguities, of black life for a
picture of black experience defined by the blackness that whiteness created.
I could not suppress the worlds of difference that keep African American
experience open to more than struggle, more than survival, more than resis-
tance, and more than suffering. I needed a pragmatic theology of African
American religious experience. This is what I have attempted to construct
in this book.

   Beyond this introduction, *Creative Exchange* contains five chapters. Chap-
ter 1, "Beyond Dichotomies: Toward a Relational Concept of Race in Afri-
can American Religious Experience," first appeared in part as a journal
article in celebration of Charles H. Long's contribution to the study of black
religion.[45] It has been significantly revised and expanded. Based on Edward
Farley's book, *Deep Symbols*, I develop a relational concept of race as a deep
symbol. I then place the symbol in conversation with two very different
views of race in black philosophy, drawing on Lucius T. Outlaw's *Race and
Philosophy* and Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House: Africa in the
Philosophy of Culture*. I use these thinkers in order to disclose the grotesque-
ries of race discourse in African American experience. I then connect race
relationally to African American religious experience by drawing on Long's

hermeneutical phenomenology and Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of the *sensus communis* (community sense). I close by showing how the relational concept of race meaningfully comes to expression in traditional African ways of religious and moral thinking as well as in contemporary African American religious thought. When race is understood as a deep symbol, but one that is radically ambiguous, it enters into creative exchange with difference. Race and difference are then relationally united into a picture of the world in which mutuality concretizes the event of Beloved Community.

Chapter 2, "We See Through a Glass Darkly: Slave Narrative Theology and the Opacity of African American Religious Thought," was tested as a chapter in Anthony B. Pinn's and Benjamin Valentin's *The Ties That Bind*.[46] It has also undergone significant revisions. This chapter is a critique of slave narrative theology as developed in Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings's *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (1991, 2005). Here I identify several interpretative problems that arise when theologians seek, in the world of slave culture and slave religion, a protoblack theology. I retrieve Long's concept of "opacity" to move the discussion of black sources of religious insight into modes of interpretation that are grounded on difference and oriented toward forms of enlargement in which creative exchange keeps African American theology open to internal criticism and a truly interdisciplinary discourse. In creative exchange, all of our sources of religious insight are irreducible wells from which to draw vibrant interpretations of the worlds of difference that make up African American religious experience.

Chapter 3, "Faith on Earth: A Defense of Redemptive Suffering in African American Theology," is an apology in defense of redemptive suffering in African American religious experience. My argument is set in relation to the critique of redemptive suffering given by Anthony B. Pinn in *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* and Delores S. Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness: Womanist God-Talk*. Mine is a critical reading of their positions on theodicy and sins of servanthood and surrogacy. My defense of redemptive suffering is derived from my reading of H. Richard Niebuhr's phenomenology of faith in *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*. I argue that redemptive suffering is not inherently a theological symbol but an economic symbol of exchange. At its very root is the experience of creative exchange. Redemptive suffering symbolizes creative exchanges of human possibilities of faith, hope, and love concretely actualized within our experiences of evil and suffering. These possibilities are not derived benefits or goods from suffering and evil. Rather, they are possibilities copresent or creatively exchanged in the experiences of suffering and evil. I argue that such

an account of redemptive suffering adequately meets the religious demands of those who sing and pray that "God will make a way out of no way."

Chapter 4, "The Smell of Life: A Pragmatic Theology of Religious Experience," brings together the major unit ideas of experience, the grotesque and pragmatic naturalism, and creative exchange and shows how they can enliven and enlarge our understanding of African American religious experience. In this chapter, Howard Thurman is my principle interlocutor with whom I engage in creative exchange. The second half of the chapter addresses the problem of prayer in my pragmatic theology when God is no longer pictured as a person but as the world—a plenitude of being—characterized by finitude and transcendence. In creative exchange, a pragmatic theology of African American religious experience connects us by memory and lived experience to the pains, sorrows, sufferings, and closures of the world. Yet it looks beyond these realities to the surprising joys of life that find expression in our songs of adoration and praise and our prayers of gratitude.

Chapter 5, "Home and the Black Church: Centers of Value in a Pragmatic Theology of African American Religious Experience," concludes the book. I have dedicated this chapter to the memory of my mother, Flora H. Anderson, who died on June 18, 2007, while I was preparing this book for publication. The most autobiographical, this chapter is a reflexive engagement of myself with the ambiguities, the grotesqueries, of two of the most powerful centers of African American religious experience. In both centers, I show how they can be simultaneously centers of harm and care. This is their grotesquery. Through commitment to creative exchange, however, I also argue that they may be concrete actualizations of that creative event that thinkers such as Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr. called Beloved Community. The ethical position that I explicitly put forward in this concluding chapter is this: If the Beloved Community that thinkers such as Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr. envisioned is concrete and not only a regulative ideal, then our particular families must enlarge themselves in creative exchange with other families and homes in which the filial bonds of kinship increase the plurality of goods connecting all our families. Moreover, when it seeks to maximize those goods and desires that make life qualitatively good, fulfilled and flourishing for all its members, the black church also concretely actualizes, however fragmentarily, the creative event of the Beloved Community. Beloved Community is not only a regulative ideal, it is also a creative event arising within the creative exchanges of the home, family, church, and by enlargement the world.