

## PREFACE

*C*REATIVE EXCHANGE: *A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience* is written to clarify the relation between my previous books, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (1995) and *Pragmatic Theology* (1998). The latter was based on my doctoral dissertation, *The Legacy of Pragmatism in the Theologies of D.C. Macintosh, H. Richard Niebuhr, and James M. Gustafson* (Princeton, 1992). Yet my constructive theology of African American religious experience is not only the result of reading those classical American pragmatists. It is also derived from a course of life. From my youth, I have been a student of theology, raising many questions and puzzlements about the Bible that I rambunctiously put to my pastor during youth retreats. Who wrote it? If God is good, why does he scare people with the threat of hell? Will I see my mother and father in heaven? Will they remember me? Why did God create the devil? If God is eternal or everlasting, how did he get to be so old? At fifteen, I read my first book on the Pentateuch and learned a very strange new set of symbols called JEPD. I did not understand all that I was reading, but its impact stayed with me even as it was later clarified for me at Calvin Theological Seminary.

Theology and Bible study were not my only youthful intellectual passions. I also read every book in my high school library that I could find on the history and art of the Renaissance. There I had my first encounter with humanism and skepticism. While cutting high school to sit and draw at the Art Institute of Chicago, I became fascinated by religiously inspired paintings and other arts. These and more of my early curiosities have contributed to my academic preoccupation with “religious experience.”

It was in the sphere of worship, however, that my fascination with religious experience was most centered. There I witnessed such things as demonic possessions, exorcisms, ecstatic worship, shouting, exuberant praying, and speaking in tongues. I asked myself and others why some people experienced such things and others did not. Throughout most of my childhood and youth, however, I reflected most on the power of prayer in faith healing services and in testimonies to miracles. These early experiences continue to inform my sense of humility when confronted by questions of African American religious experience. I learned to respect the lived practices of such religious experience, even if I had no intellectual stake in affirming the theologies that

supported them. The possibility of error hovers over all, says Josiah Royce, one of my greatest influences. This also includes my own judgments. For me, such experiences are the stuff of religious experience performed in the everyday and ordinary lives of African American people. I hope that I have been faithful in my appreciation of such experiences in this book.

My aforementioned dissertation was a critical exploration of the relevance of traditional American theology after the critique of metaphysics and classical theism by American pragmatists. Although Charles Sanders Peirce had always been of interest to me, the dissertation focused on the pragmatisms of Royce, William James, and John Dewey. The influences of these three American philosophers are present throughout this book in a constructive manner. It was James and Dewey who most informed my understanding of experience. They provided me with a monistic conception of experience that helped me make sense of the complexities of how the world is experienced. Our experiences are not compartmentalized or dichotomized into just so many world- and life-views. Rather, experience is a holistic unity of purposes and actions, thought and life, that begs for interpretation. This is a central theme in this book.

It was Royce who made metaphysical thinking lively for me. Through his great essay, "The Possibility of Error," Royce made possible my understanding of just how fragmentary all knowledge claims are—specifically, the understanding that we know in part and that those parts are increased by enlargement with other knowers. In this accumulative manner, we construct our various pictures of the whole. Royce's *whole* he called the "Absolute Knower"; in this book, I call it the *World*. It was Royce's conception of God as the world in all its concreteness and ideal potentiality that became the basis for my pragmatic theology, which I develop here into a constructive theology of African American religious experience. Studying Royce's book *The Problem of Christianity* also helped me to see that the ideals of the "Great Hope" and the "Beloved Community" are not only regulative ethical ideals. They are also actual events that are concretely manifest in communities of interpretation that are supportive of loyalty to a cause that transcends every particular cause. For Royce, that cause was "Loyalty to Loyalty." For me, it is "Creative Exchange" that maximizes not only the flourishing of human good but also the good of nonhuman others.

Theology thus became for me interpretation of religious experience both as discursive and nondiscursive practices. My study of the early Chicago School of Shailer Matthews, G. B. Foster, G. B. Smith, Edward Scribner Ames, and Henry Nelson Wieman deepened my understanding of theology as a constructive or, I should say, a reconstructive enterprise. Folks today

call this revisionist theology. From these pioneers of the Chicago School, I came to understand Christian theology in a historical manner, as borne out of human needs, the social dynamics of the historical past, and as responsive to the moral world of the first Christians. From these indirect teachers, I came to see that theology is relative to historical change and that the task of theology is to make relevant the Christian faith in contemporary times just as Christian predecessors did for their times, revising doctrine for the sake of the “glory of God” or the “kingdom of God.” This is an awesome and profoundly ethical task that contemporary theologians owe to predecessors of the Christian faith.

From these theologians of the early Chicago School I came to see that the task of the theologian is to do in and for our times what the apostles did in and for their times—namely, making sense of the revelation of God in their historical moments. It is in this sense that we stand, in our historical moment, where they once stood. In this manner I came to understand and appreciate the doctrine of the communion of saints and the symbol of Beloved Community. Beloved Community is the concrete actualization of creative exchange with the past, present, and future of Christian faith in community. Readers will note that throughout this book I resist putting the definite article before my own use of the symbol *Beloved Community*. It is my attempt to keep the concept active, not passive and inert; open, not reified; always forming and anticipated as a concrete event in experience and not only a regulative ideal.

In graduate school I continued my interests in the tradition of American religious empiricism. As the subtitle of my dissertation indicates, D.C. MacIntosh, H. Richard Niebuhr, and James M. Gustafson are major influences on my pragmatic theology. Their influence has been mostly epistemological. They share a basic insight that is central to my thinking—namely, that all theology is interpretation of human experience and that the relevance of theology is in its expressive capacities to take hold of human experience and the world experienced by all. The theological task is to give the best interpretation that we can of the widest ranges of human experience and to regulate our moral thinking responsively to the ways of the world, human needs and goods, and seek the good in ways most fitting the requirements of human flourishing. Such a position makes me suspect of what George Lindbeck calls an “experiential expressivist,” which in these days of postliberal theology, is not a good thing. It is longhand for the “L” word: Liberal!

To some of my readers, the approach I take in this book will smack of theological liberalism. I confess that they are right. If doing theology is a matter of holding a preference for one tradition over another and if it is a matter of finding oneself within a community’s narrative, then I am well at

home in the tradition of theological liberalism. No, I neither embrace ideas like the inevitable progress of history nor do I have exuberant optimism in human cooperation to bring into existence the kingdom of God on earth through ecumenical cooperation. But I am committed to human betterment by human endeavors, however momentary such events arise in our life together. I am committed to interpreting and reinterpreting and perhaps even jettisoning many of our long-standing cherished beliefs (the divinity of Jesus, the afterlife, final judgments, virgin birth, bodily resurrections, nature miracles, and the like) in light of our growing knowledge about the universe we inhabit and whether such beliefs support exclusionary modes of social discourse that threaten social peace. In good liberal fashion, from Albrecht Ritschl and Walter Rauschenbusch to Wieman and Gustafson, I also hold that the worth of Christian doctrine is appraised by its ethical consequences and by whether those doctrines comport with the world as it is experienced by all. That's pretty liberal.

Finally, the pragmatic theology of African American religious experience developed in this book is committed to a liberal, ethical vision of the great hope and Beloved Community that was so basic to the social ethics of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr. For them, Beloved Community was not only a regulative ideal. It is a human possibility. Unbridled optimists? I think not. They were very aware that social experiences of white supremacy and Jim Crow segregation, race violence and genocide, and that the rape and torture of black bodies undermine the persuasiveness of their great hope.

Like Thurman and King, I also am aware that contemporary social experiences (such as our culture wars over family values, same-sex marriage, the war on terror, the war on drugs, the indifference of government agencies to rush to the aid of victims displaced by Hurricane Katrina—indeed, that the war on terror can trump concern for the least advantaged throughout the Gulf Shore states) may tempt people to chide, “Anderson! Where is your Beloved Community?” As it was for Thurman and King in their times, so Beloved Community seems in our times a joke to the powerful machinery of Western-driven economic globalization that expands the gap between the rich and powerful and brings to near-bankruptcy African states devastated by HIV/AIDS. *Anderson! Where is Beloved Community?* Is it only a regulative ideal owing to a Kantian moral imperative that in all our relations to one another that we regard each not only as a means but as a kingdom of ends? Is my hope for Beloved Community, in our so-called postmodern moment, the last residue of modern, liberal ethics?

Yes, it is a regulative ideal. But it is also concretely actualized wherever genuine creative conflict opens to creative exchange. I see signs of it wherever

racial, gender, sexual, and class identity politics are no longer totalizing but transcended—not negated—in creative exchange with other communities. I see it where our loyalties to homes, families, and our churches are qualitatively enlarged by a loyalty to the flourishing of human needs and human goods beyond gender, sexuality, class, and race. Where these possibilities are actualized in creative exchange, there are signs of Beloved Community. On Christmas Eve, 1967, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached these words, which were broadcast beyond Atlanta, Georgia, to the world:

I have a dream that one day men will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together as brothers: I still have a dream this morning that one day every Negro in this country, every colored person in the world, will be judged on the basis of the content of his character rather than the color of his skin, and every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. I still have a dream that one day the idle industries of Appalachia will be revitalized, and the empty stomachs of Mississippi will be filled, and brotherhood will be more than a few words at the end of a prayer, but rather the first order of business on every legislative agenda. I still have a dream today that one day justice will roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. I still have a dream today that in all of our state houses and city halls men will be elected to go there who will do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with their God. I still have a dream today that one day war will come to an end, that men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, that nations will no longer rise up against nations, neither will they study war any more. I still have a dream today that one day the lamb and the lion will lie down together and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid. I still have a dream today that one day every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill will be made low, the rough places will be made smooth and the crooked places straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. I still have a dream that with this faith we will be able to adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when there will be peace on earth and good will toward men. It will be a glorious day, the morning stars will sing together, and the sons of God will shout for joy.<sup>1</sup>

Dreams and dreaming are also the stuff of African American religious experience. Such a dream also informs my understanding and hope for Beloved Community not only as a regulative ideal but also a concrete moment in creative exchange. It is a creative event. I have written this book

to conceptualize the possibility and actuality of Beloved Community. In the end, I hope that all that I have written in *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience* is faithful to this confession.

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While in graduate school, I received an exchange fellowship to study at Yale University for one year, where I was privileged to immerse myself in the study of American philosophy and religious thought with Professor John Edwin Smith during his last year of full-time teaching. It was with Smith that I feverishly read American religious thought from Jonathan Edwards to Josiah Royce and American pragmatism. Harry “Skip” Stout, who sponsored me while at Yale, enriched my understanding of American religious history. I also worked with professors Gene Outka and David Kelsey on American empirical theology and ethics. I learned much from my association with all of these thinkers, and I am grateful for their influence upon my work.

Unfortunately, while performing the many duties of my profession—teaching, advising, committee work, directing dissertations, maintaining regular publishing responsibilities, and sheer intellectual burnout—work on this book was often simmering on the back burner but not forgotten. I owe much to friends, colleagues, and especially my students who constantly encouraged me to complete it after rehearsing chapters in seminars and lectures. More than anyone, my friend Anthony B. Pinn relentlessly pushed me toward completing this volume, constantly offering commentary. I was privileged to have worked with him as a coeditor of the Trinity Press International series on African American Religious Life and Thought. Rarely did we have a phone call when he did not chide me for not completing this book. Other friends provided me a community of interpreters by responding to my work also by way of commentary; their camaraderie has been indispensable. They include Monica Coleman, Barbara Holmes, Chandra Taylor Smith, and Cory B. D. Walker.

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