

## Interview with Alton B. Pollard, Dean, Howard University School of Divinity



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*The Negro Church*

; editor of

*Black Church Studies*

(forthcoming);

"How Long This Road": Race, Religion, and the Legacy of C. Eric Lincoln

(coedited with Love Henry Whelchel Jr., Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); consulting editor for

*The Papers of Howard Thurman*

(University of South Carolina Press, 2009);

*Helpers for a Healing Community: A Pastoral Care Manual for HIV/AIDS in Africa*

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. Pollard is an associate minister of Covenant Baptist UCC Church in Washington, D.C. He and his wife Jessica Bryant Pollard, a school counselor, are the proud parents of Brooks and Asha.

**Editor Lartey:** What would you say are the main differences between teaching within the graduate division of religion setting here at Candler School of Theology at Emory University and the work you're doing now mainly with seminarians?

**Alton Pollard:** You do know that for the first, I guess, twelve years or so of my teaching career I taught only undergraduates in a religion department?

**Editor Lartey:** I didn't know that.

**Alton Pollard:** Yes, so my career was heavily oriented to religious studies from the beginning, in addition to being in a religion department in the several places where I was before Emory University. I also was especially fortunate to serve in adjunct capacities and in creative capacities. We established several new programs when I was at Wake Forest University for ten years — for example an urban studies program — and I was one of the founding faculty there, helping to establish women's studies, international studies, African studies, and American ethnic studies. So, it was an incredible experience. I was listed as a member of both the sociology and history faculties at the university. Because I was teaching courses that were not only cross-listed but were also team taught with colleagues there, it was just an amazingly rich experience that I thought I would never come out of quite honestly.

(Laughter) I had no interest in theological education.

**Editor Lartey:** Right.

**Alton Pollard:** And the irony of course, as I'm sure you can appreciate, is that here I am an ordained minister in the Christian tradition who is deeply involved in — committed to — the life of the church and the community, but has no particular interests/proclivities to be in the educational arena, where the preparation of women and men for that form of profession is concerned. Yet, I woke up one day and found myself teaching in a school of theology at Emory University. I've found the graduate division of religion to be for me a far more comfortable environment. And obviously at Candler School of Theology, it was a matter of doing "both-and" rather than "either-or." I became increasingly appreciative of the "both-and" nature of being immersed in graduate theological education and in doctoral research as a form of inquiry as opposed to the largely undergraduate and master's degree programs that I had been involved with prior to coming to Emory University. So the juncture for me actually occurred in reverse.

I found myself not wanting to be in theological education because I was already in a religious studies modality; and then found myself doing both simultaneously but always having, I think, a greater predilection for the religious studies model/component of the breadth as well as the depth that you could find there. And yet, with every passing year at Candler School of Theology, I gained an appreciation for the immensity of what could be done with the strongly Christian or

Christo-centric perspective for students who really want to stretch/broaden/expand their horizons, even within the context of that nomenclature. I really began to come to appreciate more and more the broadening implications of the recognition that there are Christianities as well as churches and congregations, and that there are a myriad of traditions that we tend not to nuance very well — that we continue to try and homogenize, particularly in the Western hemisphere. And so, that appreciation, I think, was consonant with what I was experiencing at the graduate division of religion where we were really able to focus immensely, in fact altogether, on discourses of religiosity that sometimes began with conversations around issues of faith, but oftentimes did not resort to the language of faith at all. We really did utilize the lenses of academic disciplines that were socioscientific, theological and, I guess, religious studies writ large.

So, being able to draw on all of those contexts really was an expansive project for me. It gave me an enhanced appreciation for the vitality of religion and the vitality of Christianity all at the same time. It was an experience I wasn't quite anticipating. I expected there to be an enormous tension between what I thought theological education represented and what graduate religious studies represents. But, again, the deeper I went, the more that seemed to me not to be the case. Perhaps it was simply a matter of my own understanding of what both of those trajectories meant in the first place that needed to be nuanced and reconciled in the final analysis. So, that then brought me to this place — to Howard University School of Divinity — and here I find that I'm able to draw deeply from the wellsprings of the graduate division of religion in ways that I fully hoped for, anticipated, and wanted to accomplish; but not without struggle.

As you can well — I think — understand when we're talking about theological education and where it is in the United States, or perhaps beyond, there is the recognition of normativity, which begins with the Christian tradition and again, more specifically, the Western Christian tradition. Of course that can be broken down further, and what I wanted to bring to the experience at Howard University School of Divinity was the assumption that Christianity needed to be in earnest conversation with other traditions, speaking out of their own normativity. And in so doing, that would enhance, magnify, and make even more wondrous, perhaps, for the adherents of the Christian faith, what it meant to be Protestant. That's what is primarily here in the overwhelmingly African-American and African diasporic experience at Howard University School of Divinity. But what does that mean to be faithful in the Christian tradition, by increasingly coming into contact with persons who do not necessarily reflect your own customary experience; even as you are trying to come intellectually to terms with the traditions and customs of your background? It's been...it's been a profound learning experience for me. There has been a good number of students who are slowly but surely coming to the understanding that I would like to bring here, that there does not have to be this radical disjuncture between religious studies and theological studies. There can be a ready rapprochement between the two. There's an intense conversation/dialogue that has long been waiting; and when you talk about communities of African descent, I think the wait has been even longer. We have tended in the United States context, at least in United States and Western

education, to reduce religion to a generic and require the practice of religion to take a secondary seat to the study of the analysis of religion, to be far more reticent about delving into those kinds of issues than perhaps other communities. In the African descent communities of which I'm now deeply a part of — and of course was fully participant in at Emory University as well — there is a greater recognition that you cannot have that nice easy divorcing of praxis and theory. You must continue to keep in deep and creative tension the assessment of whatever form of religiosity one is examining and the very real and lived experiences of the persons who are partaking of that religion and who are undergoing that religion.

**Editor Lartey:** Right.

**Alton Pollard:** Whatever the tradition may be, I think we have created a wonderfully artificial bifurcation because it suits our purposes in the academy. But it doesn't particularly work in the real existence of folk on the ground. And that's where, for me, the rubber has really hit the road, the grist has been there for the mill, etc. etc. And we are moving, you know, slowly, but at a pace here at Howard University. We were doing small things initially when I arrived in this very Protestant, Christian institution; and even here, the categories are pretty much limited to those traditions that are largely African-American and of African descent, whether we're talking Pentecostal, Baptist, or Methodist in their various derivations, and a smattering of other traditions to boot. So, to come here and find that there are so many students who are excited about the possibility they can be immersed in their own faith legacy by exploring other legacies/witnesses/traditions is a really exciting moment.

We are moving slowly but surely toward establishing a greater presence, for instance, of an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian community here at the School of Divinity. We have a very significant collection of Ethiopian religious artifacts dating back several centuries. We have, I believe, the third largest such collection in the United States. This has been increasingly attractive to the very large Ethiopic community here in the metro Washington, D.C. region and we are drawing on that increasingly. In fact, tomorrow we are having an unveiling of two Ethiopian paintings by a leading artist that were donated to us. And I expect that we will continue to see this unfold. We are in the process of seeking our first professor of Islam here at the School of Divinity.

This is another step where we do not seek to minimize, by any means, Christianity or the significance of the church, but we are seeking to put into conversation the Christian household of faith with the larger world of faithfulness that exists beyond even its walls. We are hoping that we can help be incubators of a healthy and good interaction between first persons/human beings who are then, secondarily, persons of specific faith traditions. And, who are even thirdly,

persons of particular national, ethnic, and regional dialectical kinds of classifications that the social order consistently is seeking to place upon people. If we can have a modicum of success in continuing to move down this road that would be great, because this is the way that not only the United States of America, but the global village — or as Bishop Tutu would call it “the rainbow people of God” — or the world, really looks today, increasingly. I’m very much a Howard Thurman proponent, and as Thurman would put it, “We have lost our fear of one another and therefore we have lost fear of ourselves.”

We need to acknowledge that this movement can be for theologians and for our theological students, that they can understand this to be an integral component of their ministries, in a region of the country that is so polyglot; and, in a country that is increasingly the same and is of course going through upheavals, groans, travail, wrestling, coming to terms, or perhaps not coming to terms very well, with the meaning of all of this color, language, religion, etc., that is coming its way. But it is coming, it is inevitable, and we can make the choice to try and stave it off through incivilities and hostilities, or we can make the choice to be glad participants in what I think is truly an exciting new venture, a new frontier of people of diverse faiths, including persons who think of themselves as having no faith at all.

**Editor Lartey:** You so beautifully described the artificial bifurcation between the different kinds of poles that you identified — you know, theological education versus religious studies, practice versus theory, faith versus practice. Now, I’m particularly interested for the purposes of this particular discussion in church versus school...and particularly in this sense: black church versus theological seminary.

**Alton Pollard:** Okay, you’re trying to get me in trouble, aren’t you?

**Editor Lartey:** (Laughter) I mean, how are you navigating that? Because I think this is one issue that I’m having to struggle with all the time. I mean, I know you are, as well. But, obviously, many of our fellows, sisters, and brothers have to struggle with this. Because it’s one thing if you’re teaching for the purposes of educating people about different traditions and different faiths, and then there’s this other thing they keep asking — “Will this preach?” So how do you navigate that? I’m thinking particularly within the context in which you are in now.

**Alton Pollard:** I would say that I navigate it with great care and compassion, not caution. I make a clear distinction. Because I don’t have a sense that one needs to, in any way, second guess or be equivocal about his/her commitments or convictions. More importantly, I make sure

that I'm always in the encounter with other colleagues, other students, other alumni of the institution, friends of the institution, etc. — members of the university across the board — being sure to, as much as possible, seek to identify with them where they are. And, in the process, I hopefully provide them with a greater aperture to hear me where I am. Now, they may not appreciate it, but at least they hear me. Actually, to be honest, I don't think the approach that I've had here is any different than anywhere else I've been. It really has always been about the old adage of being true to oneself. And in so doing, speaking truth to power with love. I have just been amazed how again and again people respond to that.

**Editor Lartey:** Right.

**Alton Pollard:** They may not always resonate with what you've said, but they resonate with the empathy, with the recognition that you take their lives and their faith and their walk seriously. That even if we're not quite on the same page, they know that we are in the same book. And they are willing, I think, to give more latitude to that kind of a purview than to the well-reasoned and aridly analytical approach of simply trying to do comparative religion as a study, for example. As I said to you, I'm preaching virtually every Sunday. I'm in churches of all kinds of denominational traditions, others are not. I would be disingenuous if I said that there were not many pastors whom I've encountered who find issue or fault with my theological perspectives. But I'm always very careful to endeavor as best I can to represent this very fine institution to the best of my ability in width, breadth, height, and depth. I make sure all of the dimensions are covered, stretching every church, congregation, parishioner, and pastor that I meet. At the same time, I invite them to do the same with me: remembering the witness of my grandmother and my parents and knowing that, again, we cannot come at this process of meeting faiths, of encountering worlds, with any kind of patronizing or condescension. Our history as people of African descent is already rife with that. We must be terribly careful not to replicate those kinds of insidious divisions in our midst. That being said, and I'm very clear about this, in the words of Frederick Douglass, "There is no progress without struggle."

**Editor Lartey:** Right, right.

**Alton Pollard:** And I understand this to be a struggle. Or, in the words of Howard Thurman, "The way of the pioneer is lonely," and sometimes we are called upon, I think, to make attestations that are not exactly going to be perceived as popular.

**Editor Lartey:** Well, yes! Now, I want to be very respectful of your time, but I wanted to just ask

your view about one more point. From the perspective of administrative responsibility, do you think that a good job is being done in preparing folk who are coming to teach? Do you think that our institutions are doing a good job in preparing people in their graduate education to teach, to mentor, to enable people to really navigate these tensions? If you look at those who are coming out of these schools to come teach at Howard University, Emory University, or wherever, do you think that people are adequately prepared? As you're hiring people, for example, as you're assessing peoples' work, and so on.

**Alton Pollard:** Yes. Well, it's a yes and no question for me because I do think that there are some outstanding, stellar younger scholars who are coming out now who are able to deftly and nimbly move between some of the disciplinary divisions, and even move outside of religious studies and theological studies to other areas of inquiry. The issue that I find the most difficult is not with the academic preparation, it's really more so with the *life* preparation and whether persons are able to translate what they get from the depth of academic scholarship into their own everyday existence. It's terribly easy for us scholars to keep our clinical eyes on and to always have this kind of antiseptic approach to other people in their religious lives and not have to be sullied or problematized by what the questions of those peoples' lives' are confronting us with. We prefer to be the ones asking all the questions.

I just find that to be horribly dishonest. And, it is utterly inhuman. It defies the very rationale for why many of us undertook to explore the phenomenon of religion in the first place. But there is a very captivating presence called the academy that is pulling us in sometimes a different direction. That becomes our primary suitor, so to speak; and, if we do not find ways to be in ready audience with the qualifications and criteria, the standards, rubrics, etc., that the university, college, or seminary is expecting of us, then we sometimes abdicate our own sense of self. We "give up the ghost," to put it in good old-fashioned language. As a result, we become no earthly good to anyone outside of the academy.