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Teaching religious studies at historically black Spelman women's college presents an opportunity to interrogate the meaning of theological education from the perspective of womanist and feminist studies. Founded in 1881, Spelman is part of both the Emancipation–Reconstruction narratives of blacks in the United States and North/South colonization projects of the late nineteenth century. Spelman's origin was as one of the institutions founded by "home" missionaries sent to the southern United States to help secure the status of formerly enslaved persons after the Civil War. Originally named Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, Spelman College began in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church as a school for "freed women."

Unlike practical and classical study prevalent in majority women's institutions of the era, an important element of Spelman's early curriculum and global missionary activities was to Christianize persons missionaries encountered. Spelman founders Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles wrote in 1883 to the American Baptist Home Mission Society: "It is very essential that these colored people shall be Christianized as well as educated....Hence the importance of schools where the Bible is taught daily, and constant attention is paid to morality, truthfulness, and honesty." The emphasis on morality at a black women's college carried the

additional baggage of questioning black women's "decency" within a larger discourse labeling African Americans as lascivious. Notwithstanding the benefit black persons derived from "home" missionary efforts, scholarship on late nineteenth century "freed" people in the United States delineates the ideology that, in a context of doubts about the capacity of formerly enslaved persons to become citizens, Christianizing blacks became intertwined with a deeply racialized discourse about black acceptability and respectability. Many European Americans as well as African Americans perpetuated this view through educational institutions established during this era.

Over the 126 years since Spelman's founding, its curriculum has developed into a diversified liberal studies program. In most respects the curricular changes at Spelman are similar to curricular evolutions of other private, once-Christian denominationally affiliated colleges and universities. However, in view of the legacy at Spelman of seeing education as a vehicle for Christianizing blacks for acceptance and citizenship, contextualizing curricular changes related to the study of religions also meant engaging Christianity's colonial legacy.

Women's Studies, Global Diversity, and Religious Studies

Notwithstanding its colonial heritage, Spelman College also has a legacy that intersects with the global women's movement. Spelman helped birth twentieth century movements that effected academic diversity through faculty and student leadership in, as well as support of, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, through the 1981 establishment of a women's center and comparative women's studies program, and through faculty and student activism for its first black woman president, Johnnetta B. Cole, appointed in 1987.

The emergence of a global women's movement and critical inquiry into the global reality of women's lower social status precipitated increased awareness of the ways traditions of scholarship help maintain women's subordination. Womanist and feminist scholars have the challengingly creative task of discerning how to engage, translate, retrieve, and disseminate knowledge about women while determining new academic practices that help overcome exclusionary epistemologies, scholarship, and pedagogies. By deconstructing, reinterpreting, and sometimes radically departing from conventional scholarly traditions, womanist and feminist scholars develop new pedagogies and epistemologies through which formerly marginalized persons become noncommodified subjects of mainstream knowledge production. Sometimes this work focuses primarily on the history, roles, and experiences of women; other times it entails diverse research and study that strengthens the broad range of scholarship through the embrace of critical, inclusive scholarly practices.

On the one hand, emphases on diversity emerging from women's studies — with which womanist and feminist scholarship intersects — relates directly to the legacy of excluding women's thought and experience from academic discourse. Women of color scholars, lesbian scholars, and scholars from working-class backgrounds have helped ensure that women's studies itself reflects the diversity of women's thought and experience. On the other hand, the women's movement and other social movements that broaden academic discourse are effecting review of the content and methodologies used across academic disciplines. The once almost-exclusive emphasis on mastery of "classical" texts as the whole meaning of higher education is giving way to broadening the canon of classical texts and to integrating praxis into pedagogical strategies. In the study of religions, the influence of womanist and feminist thought expands traditional perspectives about the academic field of inquiry to include material as well as ideal realms, and to relate both with regard to women's experiences across the broad range of global contexts and religious traditions. Discerning how to meet the challenge of making this global reality meaningful in the local context of local classrooms where religions are studied is the point at which new womanist and feminist pedagogies emerge and is one place where critical thinking and praxis connect in the academy.

Connecting the Global and the Local in Womanist and Feminist Pedagogies

At the level of the general religious studies curriculum at Spelman, using womanist and feminist pedagogies has meant overcoming the view that the study of Christianity constituted the study of religions and instituting a curriculum that engages the comparative study of religions. This includes the regular study of various religions, including African derived traditions, Islam, Eastern religious traditions, Christianity, and Judaism, while considering diverse ways globalization brings new challenges to various notions of orthodoxy. In specific courses, students complete the study of a range of religious traditions as well as an examination of diverse historic and contemporary expressions and practices within these traditions. Para-curricular colloquiums and other programs include student engagement with scholars of religion representing Native-American feminist, Latina, Asian, and other cultural and religious contexts.

Perhaps most important in the challenge womanist and feminist pedagogies bring to the study of religions at Spelman College is the necessity to address the colonial legacy of Christianity particularly within African-American communities. This includes interrogating the irony that the religious tradition widely seen in the colonial era as a means of helping to subordinate black persons persists not only as the tradition in which the overwhelming majority of U.S. blacks who identify themselves as religious participate, but also as a principal means of informing black identity. In view of the racialized colonial discourse embedded in narratives of Christianity in the colonial imagination, as Andrea Smith has observed, to be Christian is to be white. Consequently, the study of Christian traditions at Spelman College explores the colonial legacy of Christianity among Africans enslaved in the United States.

In my teaching of Christian studies, the challenging and deconstructionist impulses of womanist and feminist thought inform the content and teaching methodologies of my courses. Critical thinking about Christian traditions is structured through assignments that require students to analyze the meanings of materials in which black Christian identity is represented. Students sometimes are given an assignment to identify and analyze apparent contradictions evident in stories of persons like churchwoman and civil rights activist Septima Clark who said of her once-enslaved father “they had Christianized him.” While reading texts such as Albert Raboteau’s *Slave Religion* and Eugene Genovese’s *Jordan, Roll*, students pinpoint connections of colonial practices like “subordination” and “humiliation” to activities of persons related to Christianity, or explain the sometimes ambiguous agency of persons presented in the texts. The study of womanist and feminist “theology” integrates the challenge through interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and religiously diverse readings. In this course, as students write an ethnographic narrative about women in their lives, they connect theoretical dimensions of reading materials to their prior knowledge and experiences, and they engage in the critical analysis of women’s lives and the diversifying task of validating women’s experiences, both of which are important to womanist and feminist studies. Students also begin to deconstruct Christian hegemony as they read about women’s activities in diverse social and religious contexts.

Conclusion

Contributions of womanist and feminist scholarship and pedagogies to the wider academy and to the study of religions are unfolding still. As women’s studies and related scholarly discourses continue to permeate the academy, the cycle of knowledge production known as praxis may be more fully realized. Ideally, this can help bridge the gap between the academy and social life in ways that increasingly connect changes in the scholarly community to changes in the broader society and vice versa.

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