

Dr. Delores S. Williams, African-American Presbyterian theologian, was born 1937 in rural Alabama. Her grandmother, a daughter of a slave, along with her mother took Delores to church regularly. There she sat by her mother and grandmother singing spirituals and listening to the testimonies from black women about how God had brought them through hard times. Delores knew what it was like to be a black woman and knew the stories of racial pain and inequality. As an adult, she was part of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and completed college. Delores's husband died suddenly making her a widow struggling to raise four children during a challenging political climate. Only then did she begin to understand the spirituals sung in her youth extolling how God moves us to live with a deeper meaning. Delores claimed when she heard the teaching of feminist Beverly Harrison at Union Theological Seminary in New York, feminist theology connected with her. She had remembered the words of her grandmother telling her that white people and African-American are both Christians, but they didn't have the same religion. Delores began to understand the meaning behind that statement as she continued her education. James Cone was teaching liberation theology, so Delores heard the message of black male theologians but realized black women were still left out. Several Union Theological Seminary black women including Renita Weems and Delores Williams challenged James Cone to consider the other half of the equation in liberation theology, especially since black women made up more than seventy-five percent of African-American churches. This challenge would open a door of opportunity through which Delores would walk (Pinnock, 2005).

Delores embraced Alice Walker's term "womanism" which was different than feminism with focus on women, primarily white women issues. "Womanism" came from the concept of a "black woman" who was bold, strong, nurturing, protective, and a force with whom to reckon. Black women for centuries had cared for the babies of white people along with their own. Their

care and concern depended on circumstances and marginalization. Womanism embraced the full identity and “humanity” of black women and challenged the white supremacy of feminists. Delores’s beautiful poetic language and her ability to tell stories allowed her to explore and expound on Alice Walker’s work. One significant narrative came from the womanist womb is Delores Williams’s *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. In this amazing text, Delores reframes the story of Hagar, who like her ancestors was a black woman forced into sexual compliance by her white oppressors and then cast out with no support. But God did not desert Hagar just as God would not desert black women or anyone struggling against oppression. Hagar felt hopeless and fearful for the survival of her son Ishmael, yet God provided water for them springing from a place from where no water had been. From this narrative Delores makes the connection that God will not forget the black woman and marginalized; God will bring forth resources for survival where there appear to be none. Her connection with nature, God, struggle, and survival is a profound one. The narrative serves not only as a message of hope, but a cry for action (Williams, 1993).

Delores Williams's influence on theology both the past and present is seen in Miguel A. De La Torre’s book *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*. She is noted by JoAnne Marie Terrell in the section on God with this powerful quote from Williams’s book, "God provided Hagar with a resource. God gave her new vision to see survival resources where she had seen none before. Liberation in the Hagar stories was not given by God; it found its source in the human initiative (Terrell, 2004).” In Carter Heyward's section on Christ, Delores's view is expressed that Christ goes beyond "gender, race, ethnicity" which aligns with the thoughts expressed in Dwight Hopkins's section on Black theology. “Williams’s asserts that the ‘cross event’ of Christ is neither salvific nor liberative, but rather that the power came from Jesus’s

ministerial vision of life when he walked the earth, not the evil man did against Jesus (Hopkins, 2004).” In Elizabeth Conde-Frazier’s section on the Holy Spirit, she restates Delores Williams’s womanist theology of the Spirit focusing on the Spirit’s action in black women’s political action beginning with the revelation of the Spirit coming upon Mary in the Gospel of Luke (Conde-Frazier, 2004). Delores declares, “I believe the black church is the heart of hope in the black community’s experience of oppression, survival struggle and its historic efforts toward complete liberation (Williams, 1993, p. 205).” In Andrea Smith’s section on Anthropology, Andrea asserts “Williams draws a distinction between the Black church and African-American denominational churches, which she charges with a number of sins, including sexism, homophobia, classism, and a generally inadequate response to social and political ills of all kinds. Nevertheless, the focus of liberation is within a Christian church rather than within African traditions (Smith, 2004).” In Andrew Sun Park’s section on Sin, he asserts that “Williams concretely sums up the threefold nature of African-American women’s tormented experience (racism, sexism, and classism) in the life of Hagar in Genesis. Exploited, abused, subjugated, and raped by masters and their spouses, African-American women were forced to play surrogates for their masters’ spouses – from being sexual partners for their masters to mummies to white children (Park, 2004).” Such sin, cannot be ignored and is a call for action. In Karen Baker-Fletcher’s section on Spirituality, she states, “Delores Williams holds a womanist theology of survival and liberation with an emphasis on a spirituality of survival...She argues that God does not always liberate, so it is important that the theme of liberating spirituality is balanced with the theme of survival and the praxis of resistance to oppression. For Williams, it is ‘the spirit’ that empowers black women to survive oppression even when liberation is far off (Baker-Fletcher, 2004).” Fletcher stated that “Delores Williams was the first womanist

theologian to write on ecology and black women, offering a social-historical analysis of the ‘violation and exploitation of land and of women’s bodies’ (Baker-Fletcher, 2004).” Finally, in Karen K. Seat’s section on Feminist Theology, she praises the work of womanist theologians Renita Weems and Delores Williams as examples of womanist theologians who have used their narratives to ‘illuminate’ the scripture’s dialogue to social groups. As Delores Williams puts it, “Hagar’s predicament involved slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, rape, domestic violence, homelessness, motherhood, single-parenting and radical encounters with God (Williams, 1993, p. 4).” “Black women today can take strength from Hagar’s story because many African American single mothers struggle to keep the family together in spite of the economic situation created by ‘ruling class’ subjugation (Seat, 2004, p. 259).”

My encounter with Delores Williams through her book, through the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, through the *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*, and her speech as part of Panel IV of the Religion and Feminist Movement Conference at Harvard University in 2002 has profoundly changed my theology. While the information in the address was already attained through the other resources used for this paper, listening to her voice and the poetic brilliance in her delivery, confirmed the appreciation I had already adopted around her narrative and her womanist theology.

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