

**Knowing God, Forcing Change:  
Early Methodism as Seed for a Reconstruction of Black Womanhood**

a work in progress presented by Debra M. Washington  
at Tenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies  
Oxford, England  
August 12-22, 1997

This essay considers a contextual framework for understanding and evaluating dialogically the implications of a Wesleyan doctrine of God on the "subversive" ministries of nineteenth-century black preaching women. At first glance, such an exploration may seem questionable because of the lack of historiographical resources that place the eighteenth-century Englishman and founder of Methodism in radical conversation with nineteenth-century black Americans. Thus it is necessary to allow a wide dialogical berth that accomplishes three tasks: First, takes into account John Wesley's understanding of God as the Creator who empowers and expects women to hear and respond to the Spirit for themselves. Second, frames the evolving belief systems of black women within the context of three constructs of female identity formation: the cults of "true" and "noble" womanhood and "vocational calling." And third, examines the autobiographies of two daughters of the Methodist tradition -- Jarena Lee and Amanda Berry Smith -- for ways in which their conceptions of womanhood built on Wesley's defiance of contemporary social conventions as a means to value their own lives and vocations. By grounding this discussion on Wesley's affirmation of female spiritual independence, we can explore his theological system through a lens rarely employed. We can also gain a better understanding of how the lived experiences of black women represent the "first flowering" of black identity to include their material conditions.

Roots of Wesley's affinity for behavior that appears radical or even "irregular" may be traced to his mother's self identity. Susanna Wesley did not hide her understanding of her personal calling behind "privileged femininity." In fact, to some extent she located her value and agency in the exercise of pastoral authority. Like other women who challenged the maleness of ministerial leadership, she perceived connectedness to her divinely-crafted self with her personal witness as a woman who demonstrated agency *and* spiritual responsibility. For instance, in her husband's absence, Susanna called together members of their congregation who desired spiritual guidance. When Samuel Sr. attempted to rebuke his wife for usurping the authority of the male leaders he left in charged, Susanna informed him that she too was held accountable to a higher authority. Thus at an early age, the founder of Methodism was exposed to a female presence that challenged the normative concepts of womanhood.

Less than a century after the evangelistic work of the Wesley family, history records the experiences of African American Methodist women who visibly affirmed the relationship between the individual and God as primary. To these women of faith, there was no authentic self, no awareness that one was part of the movement of life without their Creator. Following the teachings of Wesley, these women believed that Methodists

were expected to testify with their lives to the salvific power, saving grace, and enduring love of God. Their appropriation of Wesleyan tenets was made easier by African religious models transported through ancestral African American witnesses that pointed to their Creator's eschatological hope. They diligently cultivated an inner life aware of the presence and power of God as their basis for the development of a genuine sense of self, and ultimately authentic existence in the world.

*earn of these Wesleyan affirmations?*

The fact that nineteenth-century black women found Methodism attractive is not surprising. Not only did its simplistic proclamations direct the Wesleyan message to the poor and disenfranchised, but its evangelical sentiments placed the slavery question outside of the will and laws of God. Further, Methodism reconnected the socially excluded to a spirituality in which neither their gender nor their race precluded them from answering the divine call to righteousness or walking in the path of grace that leads to eternal salvation. Methodism refashioned the Christian faith, offering to the daughters and sons of Africa an American religion they could "experience" in much the same manner as they did their African traditional religions, Islam, or West African Christianity. Moreover like the Baptist faith, Methodism proved adaptable to subordinated American blacks. That is to say, they could make Methodist Christianity their own. For black women, it also rekindled their awareness of a "personal" God who empowers all of creation, including the "oppressed of the oppressed" to be morally responsible and live authentically. In spite of Wesley's worldview, women were denied access to official ministerial positions in the early phases of American Methodism (an in many instances continue to be shut out today). All the more reason why black preaching women of the nineteenth-century employed their understanding of the nature of God to combat the traditionally accepted maleness of ministry. From the day Wesley baptized his first black converts -- one female -- black Methodist women have endeavored to reconstruct the normative role of women in organized black religious life.

Traditional research on antebellum black women organizes identity construction around a bifurcation of the cults of "true" and "noble" womanhood. Rosemary Skinner Keller<sup>1</sup> has challenged the assumption that the dynamics of selfhood among black women with a vocational vision could be adequately represented by either cult. She raises the possibility of an alternative construction, "vocational calling," which provides ideological space for antebellum black women. This determinant of selfhood speaks to the "multiple conscious black womanhood" which Darlene Clark Hine employs to critique the limited gendered analysis W. E. B. DuBois offers in his theory of double consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Like race, class, gender or sexuality -- the most common factors considered in discourses of identification rooted in being black and female -- religion also seems to be indelibly established as a factor in the attainment of self-conscious womanhood. In fact, Loewenberg and Bogin have observed that "womanhood was sanctioned by religious values."<sup>3</sup>

The paradigm of vocational calling is reflective of the self-defining strategies employed in Jarena Lee's *Religious Experiences and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*; and Amanda Berry Smith's *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist*. Both autobiographic narratives point to attempts by black women to push beyond both cults to define themselves. As clergy, their experiences of black womanhood have been subsumed with those of non-clergy black women. Granted, their stories serve as clear evidence that nineteenth-century black

women's relations with black men were not free of patriarchal constraints.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the "double jeopardy" of sexism and heterosexism that subjugated them in their efforts to gain access to the masculinized pulpit was not synonymous with the experiences of non-clergy women. Unlike other nineteenth-century female activists who "constructed themselves as role models of hyperrespectability as a means to uplift the race and to counter demeaning stereotypes of their womanhood,"<sup>5</sup> female preachers opted for a different path. The road selected was one for which their heritage granted ample space.

### Black Womanhood: From Africa to the American Plantation

African American women greeted the nineteenth-century less than five generations removed from black female ancestors whose gendered agency was visible, accepted, and at times, autonomous. In Africa, black women easily established a public presence. Unlike the Christianity introduced in the U.S. to plantation slaves and later to free blacks, the practice of African religions included women in prominent ministerial roles. For instance, black women were priestesses, queens, midwives, diviners, and herbalists; they were among the major practitioners of both good and evil witchcraft.<sup>6</sup> While the slave trade interrupted their communal African existence, their African heritage enabled African and later African American women to continue performing prominent functions in their Christianized religious practices. In fact, women were often allowed and expected to exercise spiritual leadership. They preached during clandestine services; prescribed herbs and roots as medicines and folk remedies, acted as midwives in childbirth, engaged in fortune-telling, and at times served as conjurers and mediums.

Nevertheless, as the "invisible institution" became an increasingly public one, the black religious tradition began to mirror its white Christian counterpart, complete with hierarchy, structure and patriarchal conventions that discouraged and/or limited female leadership and excluded women from positions of spiritual authority. Pulpit space, once open, was now closed. Black women were silenced, their identity co-opted, their position moved from the pulpit to the pew. The function of preacher was masculinized, and the male preacher typically became the only black man extended any manner of respect from the white community. Yet, the tendency to marginalize women -- a byproduct of this emerging, transforming religious tradition -- did not begin with the repression of their religious role. Rather, this institutionalized sexism began at the onset of slavery, when black women were perceived as a source of labor -- their own and that of their progeny. Black women were forcibly transported into a society that dehumanized them both because of the mythology of inferiority constructed around their blackness as well as the mythology of chastelessness constructed around their femaleness. The African-centered notions of womanhood under which black women once operated was systematically replaced by a "heritage of sexualized slavery" that approved any and all violations of their bodies and their spirits. For the first time, black women confronted domestic ideologies and social conventions of womanhood that were alien at best, and at worst excluded them from the definition of woman.

### Black Womanhood: Invisible Within "True Womanhood"

The cultural and social configurations of nineteenth-century America created the "cult of true womanhood" as the normative concept of the ideal woman. In short, a "true" woman was perceived as a (middle class) white woman; she was never mistaken to

*Black womanhood  
the prior construction,  
particularly in slave holding areas.*

be a black. This convention emphasized piety, purity, submissiveness, innocence, modesty, and domesticity. In other words, as a "good" woman, the ideal woman located her value and agency within the domestic and submissive sphere of her home. She was a nurturing mother, and like the dominant discourse, she idealized her capacity to procreate. The cult of true womanhood dressed the ideal woman as the model of beauty and culture; a feminine creature worthy of respect, protection, and care. In fact, her femininity made room for her to grieve, appear weak, rely on the strength of men. Her femaleness propelled her to a moral level of superiority that surpassed any male. She lived within a dualism that placed the homefront and the societal world in locations that paralleled the dichotomy of female and male natures.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, any attempt to tamper with this complex mixture of virtues would most certainly and speedily damn male or female "as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic." As a result, idealized images of white womanhood became yet additional weapons in the battle to strengthen white racial dominance. In short, this "privileged femininity" was "defined in relation to what is hegemonically masculine" and crafted "to accommodate the wants and interests" of white men.<sup>8</sup> The black woman's determination to reimage herself is serious and unrelenting. The "cult of noble womanhood" is but one illustration.

#### Black Womanhood: "Noble Womanhood" As Public Womanhood

Through the "narrow space and dark enclosures" they endured, black women created strategies to reconstruct their womanhood, reshape their self-esteem, reestablish their connectedness to their divinely-crafted selves and replace the dehumanizing images projected of black America. The answer for some: the "cult of noble womanhood." This project of restoration required the development of a distinct, interior consciousness; one that declared the visibility of black women in traditionally accepted masculinized enclaves and reflected the womanist tradition of communal concern. Among the female actors rising to the occasion as a catalysis in reform and humanitarian movements was Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

As a social justice advocate, Wells-Barnett reflected the cult of noble womanhood, which presumes an "authentic" image of black women as powerful, independent actors who are responsible to and for their community. This communal commitment was fueled by their religious heritage, a legacy from which black women could identify themselves as "homemakers and soldiers." While they often worked without black men, they rarely stood in positions that could be perceived as being in direct opposition to men. Yet, theirs was a heritage that laid the foundation for an expression of black womanhood that was overtly religious and would critique the church from within.

#### Black Womanhood: "Vocational Calling" -- the "Triple Jeopardy" in Religious Culture

By the nineteenth century, black women required a new paradigm of womanhood that would enable them to challenge the dichotomous thinking that lay beneath the only acceptable portrait of ordained ministry in the black church: black and male. Part of the fuel that fed their subordinate status emerged from prevailing biblical exegesis. Male ministers, who pointed to the Bible for evidence of the normative role assigned to women, often retreated when female ministers challenged the church's oppression of women. Black women could not be counted on for wide support, either. They were

socially and theologically conditioned to prefer male ministers and to be suspicious of female religious leadership. Furthermore, both the foreign (through the assignment of missionaries) and the domestic pulpits were deemed male preserves, thanks to certain interpretations of the Apostle Paul's indictment of women. Though women did travel overseas as missionaries, their duties were generally relegated to the sphere of women and children. Of the experiences of black female preachers, nineteenth century educator Anna Julia Haywood Cooper offers an apt analysis: "white or (black) men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on every subject, when they strike the women question they drop back into sixteenth century logic."<sup>9</sup>

Vocational calling advanced the social construction of the cult of noble womanhood by concretizing heretofore masculinized *public* space for black women to exercise spiritual authority. Like noble womanhood, vocational calling enabled black women collectively and individually to forge an integrious identity, one that equally emphasized race, gender, class, and vocation. Creating divergent meaning systems that evolved from their spiritual center was not new to black women. While this model strayed from the norm, it did not emerge as a panacea. Nor did nineteenth-century black female preachers consider their method of identity formation as a ticket out of the responsibilities of a call to ministry, the third element of what could constitute Theresa Hoover's "triple jeopardy."<sup>10</sup> They knew that the black church, the training ground for leadership development and organizational skills for black women prior to the Civil War, could and probably would continue to be a patriarchal institution after the Civil War. Though they were officially denied positions of clerical leadership, some black women were determined to attract their own followings if necessary. They were committed as well to developing a sense of self consistent with the doctrine of Wesley: one that was chosen neither by whites, men, nor themselves, but by God. Two such women were Jarena Lee and Amanda Berry Smith.

#### Life Stories of Two Black Preaching Women

Jarena Lee and Amanda Berry Smith possessed each of the factors deemed necessary to demonstrate one called to ordained ministry. First, each was a charismatic woman whose personality was electrifying. Individually they experienced "ecstatic" religious experiences, and rather than argue against the high standards to which women were held, they challenged the Church and society to consider a reinterpretation of those ideals as well as preaching as a masculinized sphere. Second, each possessed preaching skills that included the ability to "stir a crowd with fiery, silver-tongued oratory." In a more inclusive environment, they could have been referred to as "daughters of thunder." Still, they held in tension the delicate balance between public speaking and their responsibility as well to serve as "moral guarantors of the social order." Third, each demonstrated the "call," the divinely-endorsed vocation to preach and minister to oppressed and captive peoples. The ability to demonstrate the "call" was crucial in the legitimization of the preaching role because "the call was a deep personal experience, a long lasting, unshakable conviction that they were somehow chosen to do this difficult task in the face of seemingly insurmountable barriers."<sup>11</sup> The experiences of Elizabeth, a black woman who also ministered without official ordination and who was known only by her first name, is characteristic of nineteenth-century preaching black women:

"I often felt that I was unfit to assemble with the congregation with



whom I had gathered, and had sometimes been made to rejoice in the Lord. I felt that I was despised on account of this gracious calling, and was looked upon as a speckled bird by ministers to whom I looked for instruction, and to whom I resorted every opportunity for the same; but when I would converse with them, some would cry out, 'You are an enthusiast;' and others said, 'the Discipline did not allow of any such division of the work;' until I began to think I surely must be wrong."<sup>12</sup>

*Jarena Lee.*

Being classified as "other" was not a strange position for Jarena Lee. In a single year of her ministerial career, she logged 2,325 miles and preached 178 sermons. Lee was probably born free in 1783, the same year the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared slavery illegal in the commonwealth. Early on she earned her living as a domestic. Self-described as the first black female preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, she delivered the first official challenge to the restriction of women preachers at the age of 26 when she first confronted Richard Allen, pastor and founder of Bethel AME. Bethel, as it was respectfully called, is the mother church of black Methodism, and was formed in response to the segregation and discriminatory practices black Methodists endured at the hands of white Methodists. Known for her mystical religious visions, Lee describes the emergence of her calling:

"... on a certain time, an impressive silence fell upon me, and I stood as if someone was about to speak to me, yet I had no such thought in my heart. -- But to my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understood, which said to me, 'Go preach the Gospel!' I immediately replied aloud, 'No one will believe me.' Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say -- 'Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends.'"<sup>13</sup>

Convinced of her newfound vocation, Lee "took a text and preached in my sleep." Allen, was not as easily persuaded. When she relayed her experience, he informed her that "... the Discipline.... did not call for women preachers." His response was both calming and tension-laden to Lee:

"This I was glad to hear, because it removed the fear of the cross -- but no sooner did this feeling cross my mind, than I found that a love of souls had in measure departed from me; that holy energy burned within me, as a fire, began to be smothered. This I soon perceived.

Oh how careful ought we to be, less through our bylaws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God."<sup>14</sup>

Her understanding of her heaven-sent mission was so closely tied to her identity that Lee struggled with illnesses she was convinced were connected to her inability to press on. One experience led her to write, "...there was but one thing which bound me to earth, and this was, that I had not yet preached the Gospel."<sup>15</sup>

She said her subsequent marriage in 1811 to Joseph Lee, himself a pastor, as changing her "situation in life." Within six years, five relatives died, including Joseph, leaving Lee a widow with young children. In 1817, she revisited the subject of female preachers with Allen, now an AME bishop. Rather than request a license to preach, she now settled for approval to hold prayer meetings and to "exhort" occasionally. Allen legitimated this request, but went further some time later when he heard her exhortation during the sermon of a man who "seemed to have lost the Spirit." She explains,

"The Bishop rose up in the assembly, and related that I had called upon him eight years before, asking to be permitted to preach, and that he had put me off; but that he now as much believed that I was called to that work, as any of the preachers sent. These remarks greatly strengthened me, so that my fears of having given offense, and made myself liable as an offender, subsided, giving place to a sweet serenity, a holy joy of a peculiar kind, untasted in my bosom until then."<sup>16</sup>

Walking in her calling was not easy for Lee. As a woman, she was often concerned with how she was being perceived, and always in awe of the power that appeared to be bestowed upon her -- one born of parents "wholly ignorant of the knowledge of God." Dedication to her call was all-consuming, almost as if Lee appeared invisible to herself without the practice of it. The need to make parental decisions did not derail her either, for Lee was not one to be consumed by maternal responsibilities. Such a characterization does not imply that she was not a "good mother," but rather that she expected God to take care of her children as long as she cared for His. Perhaps the best example of her reasoning is once when her son was ill, she accepted an invitation to preach thirty miles away from home. Rather than struggle with guilt feelings because of her absence or spend time thinking about her son and his welfare, she says, "his condition was hid from me, less I should have been diverted from the work." When she returned to a healthy child, Lee decided to "forsake all to preach the everlasting Gospel." Again she left her son with friends, and embarked upon a self-styled evangelistic crusade. Throughout, she displayed the unctuousness characteristic of her contemporaries.

While Lee may have been born free, she was definitely born poor. Separated from her family at the age of seven, she learned early -- as did many other nineteenth-century black Americans -- the importance of striving to cultivate internal strength. Her womanhood was sanctioned and nurtured by her religious values. She was who she was as a result of what God had done to her and her spiritual sensitivity. Not only had she been converted to God, but God converted Himself to her by recognizing her and calling her to a challenging but fulfilling vocation. On her journeys, she often acknowledged being made aware of "the spirit that I may have to contend with." She concludes her pamphlet while on the road in 1842, "feeling it better to wear out than to rust out." She is now, she says, "something more than fifty years of age." A woman who "wishing to know much of the way and law of God, has therefore watched more closely the

operations of the Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> We do not know with certainty when Lee passed from this life to the next, but before she did, another black preaching woman was in training.

*Amanda Berry Smith.*

In some quarters, Amanda Berry Smith was known more for her singing abilities than her preaching skills. After the unexciting start of a 1876 camp meeting, one attendee recalled feeling overwhelmed by the cloud of depression that was descending upon those praying while kneeling on straw. He was not impressed by the earlier Bible lesson he received from the colored lady kneeling nearby. But when the woman, “dressed in a very plain garb,” lifted her voice in song, “something like a hallowed glow seemed to rest upon the dark face before me, and I felt in a second that she was possessed of a rare degree of spiritual power.”<sup>18</sup>

Smith is legendary for contradicting the saying, “you can judge a book by its cover.” She was born in 1837 in Maryland, more than two decades before Margaret Newton Van Cott became the first Methodist Episcopal Church female to be granted a local preacher’s license. Smith’s father struggled to purchase his family’s freedom, and when he did, Smith moved to Pennsylvania and settled near an abolitionist stronghold. Like many narratives, hers speaks of a religious conversion that occurred in stages, the first commencing during a Methodist revival at age 13. Her religious and identity forming journey, she contends, featured both God and the devil speaking audibly to her. After one incident that followed an 1856 camp, she relayed her experience and then her responding action:

“The Devil told me I was such a sinner God would not convert me. When I would kneel down to pray at night, he would say, ‘You had better give it up; God won’t hear you. . .

Then I thought if I could only think of somebody that had not sinned, and my idea of great sin was disobedience, and I thought if I could only think of somebody that had always been obedient. . .

All at once it came to me, ‘Why the sun has always obeyed God, and kept its place in the heavens, and the moon and stars have always obeyed God. . .

So I began ‘O, Sun, you never sinned like me, you have always obeyed God . . . tell Jesus I am a poor sinner.”<sup>19</sup>

That same year, she converted and joined the AME Church in York, Pennsylvania. She married twice; the first resulting in the birth of a daughter, Mazie Devine, the second in four sons who died in infancy. She was widowed twice. Smith did not consciously acknowledge any calling until 1868. Two years later, the direct commission arrived:

“I was sitting with my eyes closed in silent prayer to God, and after (the pastor) had been preaching about ten minutes, as I opened my eyes, just over his head I seemed to see a



call - minister  
outer - roles in  
class etc

beautiful star, and as I looked at it, it seemed to form into the shape of a large white tulip; and I said, 'Lord is that what you want me to see? If so, what else?' And then I leaned back and closed my eyes. Just then I saw a large letter 'G,' and I said: 'Lord, do you want me to read in Genesis, or in Galatians? Lord, what does this mean?'

Just then I saw the letter 'O.' I said, 'Why, that means go.' And I said 'What else?' And a voice distinctly said to me 'God preach.'"<sup>20</sup>

She began evangelistic work, but because she was fourteen years ahead of the AME Church's decision to license women to preach, Smith accepted invitations to "speak" at revivals and to conduct seminars. Her autobiography does not permit us to presume that Smith's identity was as closely aligned with her calling as witnessed in Jarena Lee's experience. Smith's life journey does, however, demonstrate the strong connection between her identity formation and her spirituality. Like Lee, Smith also was forced to contend with expectations that she focus on or at least fulfill the traditional role of wife and mother and function within society through the identity gained from a husband and children. Still, her family system enabled her to imagine and reflect a functioning and powerful selfhood that was not other-defined and determined. Her sense of self appeared to be intricately woven into a spiritual tapestry, one that emphasized her commitment and her pursuit of complete consecration. As with many of her contemporaries, Smith strove to live a morally high life and to encourage as many others as possible to do likewise. It appears as if she was constantly affirmed in her close-knit family; when she announced her conversion, her parents joined the church. She often spoke of her spiritual roots:

"Always on Sunday mornings after breakfast, (my father would call us children around and read the Bible to us. I never knew him to sit down to a meal, no matter how scant, but what he would ask God's blessing before eating. . . My grandmother was a woman of deep piety and faith. I have often heard my mother say that it was to the prayers and mighty faith of my grandmother that we owned our freedom. . . I never remember a time when I went to bed without saying the Lord's Prayer as it was taught me by my mother. Even before we were free, I was taught to say my prayers."<sup>21</sup>

What is clear, however, is that Smith vocational vision was shaped by "the four pillars of the Afro-Christian religious tradition," elements of early Methodism that attracted blacks -- preaching, praying, singing, and testifying.<sup>22</sup> She described herself as a "plain Christian woman." She never sought ordination, being content with "the ordination that the Lord has given me." Being satisfied to give a testimony following the preaching event during holiness revivals opened to Smith numerous camp meeting invitations. When asked to "lead" revivals, she declared she would not "preach," but "talk." Nevertheless, she was increasingly called to preach, and eventually viewed as an acclaimed holiness revival leader who could minister cross-culturally. Unlike Lee, Smith

was less concerned about how she was perceived by humanity and more interested in whether she pleased God. To her, victory over the internal struggle, that emerged continuously throughout her career, was the war that justified her presence. She was a staunch "prayer warrior" in public and in private; her religious convictions enabled her to face various crises. Her financial needs were handled by prayer -- she lived on gifts of supporters -- as was the writing of her autobiography. In reference to the latter, she wrote: "I began to think of it more seriously and prayed much over it, asking the Lord, if it was His will, to make it clear and settle me in it, and give me something from His Word that I may have as an anchor."<sup>23</sup> It would be a mistake to argue that Smith was more "spiritual" than Lee; but it is obvious that her narrative is replete with more spiritual overtones.

Equally apparent is that Smith evolved into a self-defining woman while serving as an overseas missionary. Her forty-five-year missionary career -- eight as an independent missionary in Africa -- helped win a more prominent role for women in the AME Church. During her ministry, she was especially concerned about the subordinate position of African women and devoted enormous energy to drawing attention to their plight. Furthermore, it was on this leg of her journey that the unctuous behavior characteristic of nineteenth-century black women preachers emerged with profound results. While in India, a group of Plymouth Brethren challenged the authenticity of female preachers. They demonstrated their opposition by making Smith the subject of newspaper articles and sending her letters with Scriptural texts against what she claimed was her vocation. Her response,

"I never argue with anybody -- just say my say and go on. But one night I said I would speak on this subject as I understood it. Oh, what a stir it made. The church was packed and crowded. After I had sung, I read my text: 'Let your 'men' keep silent in the church,' quoting the chapter and verse (1 Cor. 14:28) where Paul was giving directions so as not to have confusion. . . So I went on with my version of it. We had an excellent meeting and the newspaper articles stopped, and the letters stopped, and I went on till I got through."<sup>24</sup>

Before Smith's death in 1915, James Thoburn, the Methodist Episcopal Church bishop who penned the introduction to her autobiography, said he reaped more fruit from the life of Amanda Berry Smith than from any other person.

The nineteenth-century was a period of challenge and change for all African Americans, especially for black preaching women. Like their contemporaries, Lee and Smith spoke with "pen and voice," instructing and correcting the masses orally in public space from which they could transcend normative gender roles and "function as person(s) of authority."<sup>25</sup> As late as 1993, congregational estimates indicated that women comprise at least 50 percent of black America and three-fourths of the black church, possibly the "most sexist institution" within the black communal household.<sup>26</sup> While the church opened its doors to the women of the club movement, the church was less inviting to black preaching women. Nevertheless, just as black humanitarian women used the club movement to confront societal injustices as an institutionalized moral evil,<sup>27</sup> black

preaching women viewed the oppression perpetrated against them by the church as an evil that needed to be eradicated by force if necessary. Likewise, they chose to be "subjects," not "objects," in a society that adhered to cultural prescribed gender roles. They employed more agency against and within the "the moral center of public activity"<sup>28</sup> fully aware of their peculiar location. For as Anna Julia Haywood Cooper has proclaimed,

Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.' Is it not evident then that as individual workers for this race we must address ourselves with no half-hearted zeal to this feature of our mission. The need is felt and must be recognized by all. There is a call for workers, for missionaries, for men and women with double consecration of a fundamental love of humanity and a desire for its melioration through the Gospel."<sup>29</sup>

This spirit of vocational calling and vision, this contextualization of John Wesley's theological system has been consumed by thousands of twentieth century black women who are answering Maggie Lena Walker command to "make history." For example, today, black preaching women represent more than half of all the 600 women of color clergy in the United Methodist Church, including Leontine Kelly, who in 1984 became the first African American woman elected to the office of bishop of any major denomination. She remains the only black female United Methodist bishop. These "Ebony Prophets," probably constitute the largest percentage of black preaching women in any denomination.<sup>30</sup> They, along with black female clergy affiliated with other Methodist communions, are testaments to Wesley's support of such unconventional behavior as women assuming religious leadership. They attest as well to the role of "preacher" within the African American religious context as representative of public space for the validation of female identity and the application of spiritual authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Skinner Keller, ed., *Spirituality & Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in The United Methodist Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "In The Kingdom of Culture: Resistance, Language, And Silence," May 13, 1997 Black Women's Studies lecture, Northwestern University.

<sup>3</sup> Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women In Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," in *Black Women in America*, eds. Micheline R. Malson, Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, Jean F. O'Barr, and Mary Wyr (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 268.

<sup>5</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "Contemporary Narratives in Light of the Past," June 3, 1997 Black Women's Studies lecture, Northwestern University.

<sup>6</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969): chapter 11, quoted in C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 276.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara J. Harris, *Beyond Her Sphere: Women and The Professions in American History* (Westport, Conn.: 1978): 33-34, quoted in Darlene Clark Hines, "Definitions and Meanings of Black Womanhood," April 22, 1997 Black Women's Studies lecture, Northwestern University.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 21; Ruth Feldstein, "I Want the Whole World to See: Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till," *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America*, ed., Joanne Meyerowitz, 268; Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 75.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Julia Cooper quoted in Cone and Wilmore, 281, as cited in Robert Staples, *The Black Woman in America: Sex, Marriage and the Family* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1973), 69.

<sup>10</sup> Although I have nuanced Theresa Hoover phrase, it is not a radical departure from her description of "vitally involved" church women. See "Black Women and the Churches: Triple Jeopardy," in Cone and Wilmore, 293.

<sup>11</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, 278; Emilie M. Townes, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth, *Elizabeth, A Colored Minister of the Gospel*, as quoted in Loewenberg and Bogin, 130,

<sup>13</sup> Jarena Lee, *Religious Experiences and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee: 'A Preach' in Woman'* (Nashville, Tenn.: AMEC Sunday School Union/Legacy Publishing, 1991), 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13; the AME Church approved the licensing of women as ministers in 1884, but withheld full ordination until 1948. The first woman officially ordained by a black denomination was Julia Foote, who was dispatched with full ordination orders by the AME Zion church in 1894.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-6.

<sup>18</sup> J. M. Thoburn, "Introduction" to *An Autobiography: the Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (Chicago, 1893), v.

<sup>19</sup> Amanda Berry Smith, *An Autobiography*, 43-5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-8.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "Some Mother's Son and some Father's Daughter': Gender and Biblical Language in the Afro-Christian Worship Tradition, as quoted in Keller, 64.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>25</sup> Sue E. Houchins, *Spiritual Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxxii, as quoted in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 122.

<sup>26</sup> James H. Cone, "Introduction: Black Theology and Black Women," *Black Theology: A Documentary History* vol. one: 1966-1979, eds., Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 279, 281.

<sup>27</sup> Marcia Y. Riggs, "A Clarion Call To Awake! Arise! Act!" *A Troubling In My Soul: Womanist Perspectives On Evil & Suffering*, ed., Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 70.

<sup>28</sup> Frances C. Wood, "Take My Yoke Upon You," *A Troubling In My Soul: Womanist Perspectives On Evil & Suffering*, ed., Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 41.

<sup>29</sup> Anna Julia Haywood Cooper, "Womanhood A Vital Element In the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women*, ed., Shirley Wilson Logan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 65.

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<sup>30</sup> As of May 17, 1997, female clergy within the UMC system -- roughly 5,673 -- represent 13 percent of the more than 40, 737 ministers of the church. Source: the Section on Elders and Local Pastors of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Methodist Church.