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Finding, Keeping, and … Wanting One's Place: Thoughts on a "Darkening" Academy and the Epistemology of "Community"

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The Past, Present, and Future of Scholars of Color in the Religious Academy

From cocktail parties and uneventful meals, to coffee shop conversations entertained by students and professional academics, to conferences such as the American Academy of Religion, the assumed fragility of the higher education enterprise is popular fare. At times, thoughts on this

topic are packaged between two covers and distributed by academic and trade presses; and, in some circumstances these books and journal articles receive energetic attention and review. Mindful of this, and based on my assumption that you at some point over the past several months found yourself within a suitable environment for such conversation, I imagine many of you are familiar with Columbia University religious studies professor Mark Taylor's lament of current conditions within systems of higher education as expressed in a *New York Times* op-ed and more recently in the new book, *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities*.[1]

Racial and Ethic Minorities in the Troubled Academy

According to Taylor, there is little reason for those of us in the study of religion to take lightly the current condition of knowledge production and distribution in the form of institutions of higher learning. In this text he notes, "the study of religion is a microcosm of broader challenges facing higher education".[2] Hence, accordingly, it is not just those other departments and disciplines that face a crisis of meaning and significance; rather, it is those in the academic study of religion too. This, and he hopes it does, might give one pause – and force clear attention to a variety of fundamental questions: While flawed in a variety of ways – such as a somewhat restrictive arrangement of approaches to knowledge that might limit creativity and exchange through the strictures – are the traditional geographies of intellectual interests and expertise, such

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[1]Mark Taylor, *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

[2]Taylor, *Crisis on Campus*, 153.

as departments, a fundamental problem to be dismantled? Is tenure a problematic system that actually hampers intellectual ingenuity and advancement? Do the various programs and institutes that specialize in increasingly smaller intellectual questions and concerns frame part of the growing problem of higher education? And if so, and here's the rub, does the American Academy of Religion's Committee on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession (CREM) and similar organizational endeavors encourage participation in a dying system of knowledge production and distribution? Does Cornel West's claim that African Americans, for example, and this certainly can be extended to other groups, enter Modernity just as it is facing its final decline also speak to the position of racial and ethnic minorities in the worlds of higher education? Have we yet again encountered dramatic limits on the reach and impact of our embodied significance as racial and ethnic minorities on knowledge production and codification in the academic realms of US discursive meaning?

I can't continue without first making an observation, one that is somewhat tangential… but not really. I find it interesting that such questions and the growing significance of racial and ethnic minorities in the Academy comes just as some are calling into question the future and meaning of the university system. Clearly, we are at a delicate moment in higher education for most institutions and the situation is even more tragic for others. One only need think in terms of the seminaries that have closed and the others forced to think through this possibility. The economic well-being of institutions of higher learning is still in question, and this has consequences for racial and ethnic minorities in the Academy and those seeking a life in the teaching/research profession. Yet, such pronouncements of the tragic are not new, and we have

encountered this epistemological and ontological shift before. Communities of racial and ethnic minorities demand, and on some levels secure, robust subjectivity just as post-modern thought brings into question the subject and the author. But here are racial and ethnic minorities considering a future in the Academy, just as its stability and meaning is re-evaluated.

While not thrown by such developments, it is useful to place our discussion within the context of more general markers of the strength and vulnerabilities of religious studies in the twenty-first century, as well as the general economic angst and restructuring taking place within institutions for theological education.

The questions above might be intriguing, yet I doubt Taylor's academic Jeremiad and the accompanying theses regarding revisions to knowledge production and distribution will result in significant angst on the part of racial and ethnic minorities in the professional study of religion. If the communities represented by CREM are satisfied with their condition within the Academy and the future dictated by that condition, then nothing need change. But are these communities really satisfied? The various conversations initiated by CREM over the past several years, might suggest something other than satisfaction as our basis posture. To the contrary, a future composed of thick and rich involvements necessitates these questions, but also requires attention to our perception of the very nature and meaning – perhaps a type of ontology and epistemology of academic life – of our involvement in the Academy. Take the admissions process for example. How do we, and I mean racial and ethnic minorities in the profession, think of those we bring into our fold, and the process for doing so? What are our expectations regarding their

development and the markers of that development rightly achieved? Or, what does one make of the 'stuff' of success in light of and beyond traditional markers of tenure and promotion?

These comments notwithstanding and even without the benefit of hard, statistical data, I believe it safe to suggest scholars from under represented groups have, in general terms, gained a certain type of status or presence within the Academy (while still being under represented!). While one might think of this as the desire to familiarize the exotic, or the Academy's desire for persistent reminders of its liberalism, each year at the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion, there is clear evidence of a growing stability of presence. Think in terms of two of the more dominant or at least prominent markers of this status – publications and academic posts.

Within the ranks of racial and ethnic minorities in the study of religion are represented more than a few book series concerned with religious studies and theological studies done from the perspective and vantage point of the communities of concern to the Committee on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities. And what is accounted for here is only a small representation of the publishing arrangements privileging such perspectives. In addition, think in terms of the ways in which presses, granted for a variety of reasons, now more aggressively solicit books from our communities of involvement and concern. These books, for the most part, are written from within the relative security of colleges, universities, divinity schools, and seminaries.

In spite of recent and significant dissembling of institutions of higher learning, and despite economic and disciplinary difficulties, I have little doubt that the number of racial and ethnic minorities within the Academy, whatever its look, will continue to grow; these scholars

will continue to produce and place students; and publishers will continue to seek out works for publication related to these communities.

REM Scholars and Their Communities of Concern

This presence, hard fought as it was, requires re-evaluation – an interrogation of what inclusion means for the basic socio-political and cultural postures advanced or assumed when securing this involvement. For example, racial and ethnic minorities in the professional study of religion may need to re-think what is meant by 'communities of concern'. If it is a collective of the like-minded, then the recognized larger grouping of interests may not be one's community; rather, one's success with respect to inclusion – the goal of the Committee on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession – may in fact entail the shrinking of community to other academics and those devoted to the discourses and frameworks of the Academy – those who speak like and to us.

Mine is not a socio-economic argument, not a discussion of the middle-class; but rather it is a particular posture toward the world and a vocabulary for framing and articulating that posture. Furthermore, I am not positing answers; rather, I am urging the importance of such questions as a significant marker of our location and current connections to the academy. Let me suggest a few examples of what I have in mind.

Dilemmas still abound with tenure and review processes; many graphic examples and anecdotal episodes speak to the ongoing shortcomings of the system. Yet, scholars from various racial and ethnic groupings enter and in numbers significant to note survive this process – going

on to receive tenure, promotion, and endowed chairs. While not all share this story, REM scholars train and mentor generations of scholars many of which, in turn, gain academic appointments and whose written work contributes to the religious and theological thought informing the Academy. As the primary organization for those involved in the study of religion, the AAR has also shifted in certain ways based on the presence (and persistence) of racial and ethnic minorities. Members of racial and ethnic groupings have held the most significant positions of leadership such as the presidency of the organization (in the past several years – an African American woman, an Asian American woman, and a Latino) and in this way, and at particular moments, these communities have provided the "face" of the AAR.

I make these comments not to suggest all is well in the halls of the Academy, nor is my intent to downplay the problematic structures and mechanisms of knowledge production and distribution – including what counts as valuable knowledge. My perspective, I assure you, is not naïve and is not premised on the assumption that patterns of academically situated discrimination have been neutralized, nor do I pretend that we even fully understand the nature and look of the discrimination we denounce. Rather, these questions and comments serve as a way to contextualize the current moment, to frame the economy of knowledge production and discourse, and to highlight our shifting involvement over the past several decades. Discrimination remains a force to be challenged in the halls of higher education. This should not be forgotten. Yet, there is also a different type of challenge, one premised on even the limited advances made by REM scholars. That is to say, my aim is to problematize narrow and truncated perceptions of the relationship of REM scholars to the Academy, perceptions that fail to recognize that such

scholars are of a dual mind – both marginal and central to the systematic arrangements of knowledge we critique. And, furthermore, this troubled and at times troubling relationship to the Academy critique by REM scholars is the natural outgrowth of both failures and successes, and to access it requires a somewhat uncomfortable, internal critique. Allow me unpack what I mean by all this.

And I'd like to contextualize these remarks in terms of the community I know best, the community of African American scholars of religion, arguing that there are similarities one can draw between the contexts of various REM communities of involvement and concern.

African American Scholars of Religion and 'Community'

A synergy between the Academy and socio-economic and political concerns, in light of a general sense that fundamental change is possible, is perhaps most keenly represented by the wide-ranging energy and consequences of the civil rights struggles of the mid-twentieth century. In large numbers, for example, African Americans moved into predominantly white colleges and universities, and corresponding to this increased presence was a demand for curricular shifts representing the intellectual contributions of African Americans to the knowledge-base in the United States and beyond. All this, and more, required a radical shift in what had been the underlying premise of higher education – the training of citizens for their roles within the structures and machinery of socio-political and economic life in the United States. Or, did it?

The nature and meaning of this demand for greater life options, for an end to the discriminatory patterns marking life prior to this period of sustained hope, often was

theologically articulated. And within African American communities this involved first the social gospel but then a more suspicious-laden and black consciousness-oriented discourse – what we have known for more than forty years as black theology of liberation (along with its corresponding ethical and historical framings of life). With clarity and precision, black theology accessed the race-based discrimination virulent and viral in the United States, and offered a scripturally backed, alternate approach to life meant to provide deep quality of life for all – as the new meaning of the reign of God. It is reasonable to suggest the resolution of discrimination as promoted by black theology and as of the 1980s, womanist thought, is measurable in terms of traditional markers of success – economic health, political change, and so on. This makes great sense: those who suffer most should be prioritized and their needs met. However, what we failed to give adequate attention was the positioning of those making those demands, those arguing for the centrality of the suffering masses. That is to say, the scholars who argued for these changes did so, for the most part, from within the establishment and with some acknowledged obligation to the status quo. Pastoring churches and teaching within institutions of higher learning all involved and continues to entail some degree of movement away from the margins of US life and toward access to the tools associated with more centralized status. Discrimination continues to the halls of higher education, yet for REM scholars the impact of this discrimination shifted with time.

From the systemizing of this theological discourse in the 1960s to the present, there has been a tension between an assumed epistemological link to the community of concern and a rather comfortable existence with many of the luxuries associated with the status quo. This is not

to suggest, mind you, a romanticization of struggle, or a nostalgic view of misery. Rather, it is to suggest that our academic discourses involve some distance from the situations and concerns we argue as being most dear to us. More than this, I would argue, many African American scholars have remained troubled by and uncomfortable with their status as academics and this, to some extent, has resulted in bad faith. Put in the form of a question, do African American scholars claim connections to our communities of concern that are more rhetorical than existentially real?

Here I want to give attention to the need to periodically re-access the benchmarks for progress, the nature of the oppression encountered, and the role African American academics play in all this. For instance, is the current vocabulary and grammar adequate in light of current involvements in the Academy and relative distance from the more challenged segments of the African American communities of concern – including the inner workings of the churches and other religious organizations noted in talks and writings. On this score, African American scholars often talk of an interest in and efforts to write for the people for whom they are concerned. Yet, how often is this really the case? To what extent is this scholarship premised on and formulated for the needs of a community-based audience, or is it more likely scholars write to each other and for our various review committees?

As existential conditions and epistemological contexts change, should not conversation also change? And in part this should involve some attention to the nature and meaning of involvement in organizations such as the AAR and how REM scholars are to firm, project, and measure outcomes for these organizations and their involvement in these organizations. Furthermore, at times and in various ways REM scholars have sought to reify the condition of

their communities, at worse keeping them discursively fixed so as to keep academic conversation about them relevant, and this involves making static the scholar's position within a given REM community – although this positioning has changed. REM scholars have done this perhaps so as to preserve the rationale for their angst – to pin it on the structural shortcomings of the profession and the persistent problems of identity and the politics and economics of identity, over against discomfort with the ironic nature of our success: at the expense of others and for the benefit of a limited few. But what happens when the margin migrates toward center?

What To Do? Just a Thought…

A particular level of success, of place within the structures of knowledge and meaning, has been achieved. Associated with this is a certain type of freedom or at least reach and momentum. And how should one respond: argue even louder the merit of REM scholars' rhetorical devices as safeguards against power, and in this way bracket anything resembling a reflexive interrogation of the meaning of their work? Or, should some sustained attention be given to the scope of involvements and the markers of success within the profession for REM scholars? I say some attention to the latter is in order. And this begins with a deep assessment of our location – the ramifications of the cultural significance of the presence of REM scholars. This, I would argue, by and large is a period of re-evaluation – the assessment of fit between vocabulary and grammar connoting relationship to particular REM communities of concern as well as to REM scholars themselves.

Academics from under represented groups are still under represented, but are not as marginal as they once were; nor are they as marginal as some would like to believe. Hence, the present requires interrogation to a variety of questions: What does this mean in terms of our work and our representation of those we claim? *Oppression, for example, remains a vital and descriptive term with respect to so many within REM communities. Yet, the REM scholar's relationship to this condition and signifier has altered.* The old adage remains apropos – REM scholars are both oppressed and oppressor; but what does it mean to produce and distribute information within this layered context of meaning? What are the consequences for what has been assumed to be a shared epistemology of life? That is, do REM communities of concern recognize REM scholars, or do they appear foreign?

This is not to suggest REM scholars have been as relevant and as understood within REM communities as they like to believe. After all, again, REM scholars have rarely written to and for them; and scholarly conversations tend toward jargon and assumptions. Does the typical epistemology and pedagogy of REM scholars reflect their existential circumstances? Or, is work and position, grounded as it is in a shifting position within the Academy, premised on a type of voyeurism, the exoticizing or romanticizing of circumstances that are no longer the REM scholar's in the same way? While REM scholars continue to proclaim the value of the intellectual margins, for instance, there is an increasingly significant migrating toward the center – or at least away from the modes of forced marginality that once marked the REM scholar's presence in this business called the Academy. What does one do with and about these dynamics? Do they make a difference?