

A Road Less Traveled: An African American Ifa Priestess' Journey Navigating Joys and Struggles in Interfaith Spaces

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This paper offers a glimpse into some of the author's life experiences as an African American Ifa priestess and interfaith minister who finds meaning working in interfaith education in spite of the intersecting dynamics of racial and religious bias that often go unnoticed. It explains which religions were present at the first Parliament of World Religions gathering in 1893, who was excluded based on race and religion, and how the history of that event may influence who we consciously or unconsciously see and value in interreligious and interfaith spaces today.

Keywords: Yoruba, Nigeria, Ifa, African traditional religion, interfaith movement, interfaith ministry, racism

When people of unique religious and racial backgrounds intentionally come together under the banner of an interfaith or interreligious objective, I have learned the importance of assessing whose “God,” theology, or belief is dominant. After I have discovered the governing thought system, I internally ask myself the following questions to assess if the space I am in is safe: 1) Do they respect my identities? 2) Do they want to hear my input? If so, will they value it? 3) Are they interested in the wholeness of who I am? If the answer to any of these questions is “no” I conclude that the environment has the potential to negatively impact my sense of well-being regardless of how noble the intention of the project or task is.

Fortunately, I was able to answer “yes” to all the previous questions throughout my studies at the interfaith seminary I attended. My first exposure to the study of world religions came through interfaith education (learning about the world's sacred wisdom traditions), interspiritual practice (direct transformative inner experiences of sacred wisdom traditions), and interreligious dialogue (communicating with people of various cultural and religious backgrounds). As a practitioner of an African traditional religion that is often marginalized, I know firsthand the power and potential that interfaith education can make in people's lives when the components of interspiritual practice and interreligious dialogue are present. However, I also learned through observation and work that it is a mistake to assume that religious and racial bias does not exist because diverse people have come together for a common cause.

Racial and Religious Foundations in Our Interfaith Landscape

In the United States, religion has historically been used as a tool to support violent oppression and to decide which groups of people are morally superior or inferior.¹ First Nation Native Americans and enslaved Africans suffered the most under Christianity.² Racial justice

¹ Riggins R. Earl, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003).

² DeShannon Bowens, “Making the Unconscious, Conscious: Why Interfaith Communities Struggle with Racial Diversity,” *State of Formation*, September 23, 2015, <http://www.stateofformation.org/2015/09/making-the-unconscious-conscious-why-interfaith-communities-struggle-with-racial-diversity/>.

advocate and United Church of Christ minister Elizabeth Simson Durant and I discuss this more deeply in our article “If We Stay Silent, Injustice Will Persist.”³ We explore why some interfaith groups and initiatives bypass discussing the intersection of race and religion as well as their avoidance of dismantling racism within their communities. In both of our experiences, interfaith spaces have some religious variety. Racially, they tend to be organized, led, and structured by people who identify as white. Diversity tends to be a common goal rather than inclusion. As a white woman who has worked in interfaith coalitions, Rev. Durant observes:

An Interfaith gathering is already an anxious moment for many whites, who are concerned about using the right words and appearing competent, knowledgeable, and open-minded. This anxiety reflects the drive for perfectionism that is a central component of white supremacy culture.⁴ . . . [W]hite supremacy culture encourages whites to remain ignorant of their racial identities⁵ and ignore the ways that coherence between white culture and religion was achieved through violence and oppression.⁶

In order to have a better understanding of how interfaith and interreligious settings came to be what they are today, it is necessary to travel back to September 11, 1893, when the World Congress of Religions was held in Chicago, Illinois. John Henry Barrows, in his book *The World's Parliament of Religions, 1893*, describes the event through the eyes of Rev. Dr. Charles William Wendte of Oakland, California.⁷ The minister's fascination with Japanese and Chinese delegates was apparent. “The most gorgeous group was composed of the Chinese and Japanese delegates, great dignitaries in their own country, arrayed in costly silk vestments of all the colors of the rainbow.”⁸ He was captivated by the style and presence of the other delegates from Asia as well. However, Rev. Wendte's description of African delegates took a different tone. “The ebon-hued but bright faces of Bishop Arnett, of the African Methodist Church, and of a young African prince, were relieved by the handsome costumes of the ladies of the company, while forming a somber background to all was the dark raiment of the Protestant delegates and invited guests.”⁹

The *Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology* gives more information on this historic event, providing this description of what we now call the first Parliament of World Religions:

³ DeShannon Bowens and Elizabeth Simson Durant, “If We Stay Silent, Injustice Will Persist: A Call to Interfaith Communities to Own Our Racial Realities & Dismantle Racism,” *ILERA*, January 17, 2017 <http://media.virbcdn.com/files/0b/522eba3da6c732aa-IfWeStaySilentlyBowensDurant1-17-17.pdf>.

⁴ See Kenneth Jones & Tema Okun, *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups* (ChangeWork, 2001) for more about white supremacy culture. Excerpt retrieved February 27, 2016 from: http://www.cwsworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html. (Footnote is from original article.)

⁵ See especially Rebecca Parker, “Not Somewhere Else, but Here: The Struggle for Racial Justice as a Struggle to Inhabit My Country” in M. Bowers-Wheatley and Palmer N. Jones, ed., *Soul Work: Antiracist Theologies in Dialogue* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), 171–198. (Footnote is from original article.)

⁶ Bowens and Durant, “If We Stay Silent,” 6.

⁷ John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893, Vol. I* (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), 62–64, accessed at <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11489.html>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*

[A]t 10 o’clock a dozen of representatives from different faiths marched into the hall hand in hand. At the same time, the Columbian Liberty bell in the Court of Honor tolled ten times, honoring the ten great world religions—Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.¹⁰

The *Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia* also details how Native Americans were excluded from participation and African Americans were only allowed to join if they were Christian. For those who may question why African Americans had to be Christian, Tracey Hucks writes in *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, “Africa was perceived as a continent of void and dearth marked by intellectual, religious, and cultural deficiencies.”¹¹ Some Native Americans agreed to be set up in make-believe villages in an exhibit for American anthropologists as a part of the world fair that was taking place during the 1893 World Congress of Religions. Yet, they were not allowed to set up their own display as other groups were.¹² God had a color at the beginning of the interfaith movement and its color was white.

The birthing of the interfaith movement in this country consisted of a majority of white Christian men reaching out to countries primarily in the Eastern hemisphere of the world, while upholding and practicing racial oppression within the United States. Knowing this information, it is clear that the interfaith movement and interreligious dialogue in the United States began with a racialized religious hierarchy that assumed that the color of one’s skin determined the morality and righteousness of one’s God, faith, and race. When we look at the interfaith and interreligious landscape today, a lack of religious and racial inclusion still exists. The groups who were excluded and oppressed during the 1893 World Congress of Religions are still underrepresented and seen as insignificant in some interfaith and interreligious educational settings and coalitions.

A Practitioner of African Traditional Religion Discovers the Interfaith World

Before I became an interfaith minister, I was initiated as a priestess in an African spiritual tradition called Ifa. Ifa is an indigenous religion or way of life that comes from the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria. It has been practiced for thousands of years. Over sixteen years ago, I was introduced to this spiritual path through a friend in New York City who was studying with a priestess. Through her, I had the opportunity to meet an amazing African American Ifa priest who helped me see the connection between spirituality and my work as a psychotherapist. He dispelled myths of African ignorance and superstition, which was very affirmative for me as an African American woman. As I learned practices that showed me how to honor my ancestors and connect with spiritual forces of nature (or deities) known as Orisas, I knew I had found a spiritual path that felt like home.

¹⁰ Derek Michaud, ed., “World Parliament of Religions (1893),” *Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology* (2004), <http://people.bu.edu/wildman/bce/worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm>.

¹¹ Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 29.

¹² Michaud, ed., “World Parliament of Religions (1893).”

As excited as I was learning how Yoruba people practiced Ifa and how it could be applied in my present-day life, I was advised by my friend's mentor to keep it to myself in order to avoid the possibility of experiencing exclusion and prejudice. According to Dianne M. Stewart, a fear of all things related to African culture is defined as Afrophobia and it is a product of slavery and colonialism.¹³ The guidance was well intended but it instilled apprehension within me and an expectation to be feared rather than embraced by people who did not practice a traditional African, indigenous, or nature-based spiritual path.

It should be of no surprise that I walked into the doors of seminary carrying unconscious levels of Internalized Oppression and Inferiority¹⁴ that took me the entire first year to work through as it related to the intersection of my racial and religious identity. While the inclusion of African and Native American religions in the seminary's curriculum confirmed it was a place that would respect my religious and racial identities, I still needed to see the people I would journey with to conclude whether or not it was indeed safe. On the first day of class, I noticed 20% of the students were people of color and the rest were white. I also recognized by style of dress that one of my classmates was probably a practitioner of one of the African spiritual traditions that worshipped Orisas.¹⁵ This was the final confirmation I needed.

Being in a learning environment that encouraged inner expansion through world religions, visiting various places of worship, and having hands-on experiences with sacred traditions profoundly changed me and my fellow classmates. We discussed and analyzed how these practices affected our lives and shaped our view of the world and our place in it. To this end we engaged in two of the motivations for interfaith work that Kusumita Pedersen has described as: 1) engaging in a "common task" and 2) searching for truth and understanding in the context of religious plurality.¹⁶

We were allowed to process and discover our personal truth and hold it without negating or diminishing the truth of those we may serve. To this day, I have not experienced the type of connection and growth with a group of people like those women and men I studied with for two years. The process of becoming an interfaith minister taught me the difference between inter-religious dialogue and the application of interfaith ministry. The latter compels us to actively assist everyday people while honoring the totality of who they are. This is why after completing the seminary program I continue to participate in interfaith work.

¹³ Chika Oduah, "Are Blacks Abandoning Christianity for African Faiths?" *The Grio*, October 19, 2011, <http://thegrio.com/2011/10/19/african-religions-gain-following-among-black-christians/>.

¹⁴ See The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond and its definition of Internalized Racial Oppression at <http://www.pisab.org/our-principles>.

¹⁵ Religious traditions that consist of Orisa worship, such as Ifa, took on different names and variations as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. In Cuba, the worship of Orisas are practiced in Lucumi. In Puerto Rico, Orisa worship is practiced in Santeria. Brazil's religious traditions are Macumba and Candomble; in Haiti the religious tradition is Vodoun.

¹⁶ Kusumita P. Pedersen, "The Interfaith Movement: An Incomplete Assessment," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 74-94.

Challenges and Opportunities in Interfaith Work Moving Forward

There are many interfaith coalitions doing great work to address the needs of people and the planet. However, forming and participating in multi-religious alliances to disrupt Islamophobia, speak out against immigrant bans, protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, or support the Black Lives Matter movement does not mean racism no longer exists within the structures of our interfaith and interreligious coalitions and educational programs. We must be willing to examine how the history of the interfaith movement’s exclusionary racist practices unconsciously shows up in the design of our organizations and interactions with each other.

In my preparation and research for this article, I wondered how many people of African descent are asked to provide their input in interreligious and interfaith settings outside of the topic of race and racism. And for those of us who fit into the category of racial and religious “minority,” how often are we given a platform to discuss the religions we practice with the sole purpose of sharing what drew us to our path, the beauty we find in it, and how the implementation of our practices helps us to serve others? I have been through the highs and lows of having both experiences.

Some people have asked me to participate in interreligious dialogue because I am African American and they want to have the appearance of racial diversity. While no one has admitted this as explicitly as I have stated, it is a fact. I accept the invitations as much as I can because I want more people of color to be included to have our voices heard. Declining the invitations would cause me to question if the organizers, who are usually white, would make an uninformed generalization that “people of color are not interested” and therefore discontinue asking us to be involved.

I have felt most appreciated when I am asked to be a part of an interfaith or interreligious event because the organizers respect my racial and religious identities. I treasure these experiences because they serve as reminders that there are people who value the contribution of my service work and religious experience. These sisters and brothers move past tolerating the “other” to full affirmation. The declaration of their inclusive actions easily paves the way for true solidarity to be experienced by everyone who is coming together for a common cause.

Shelly Tochluk addresses the need for spiritualized racial justice in her book *Living in the Tension*.¹⁷ In an essay explaining the philosophical foundation for her book she writes, “For the sake of transcending the pain and difficulty experienced within U.S. society, many people aspire to leave it behind rather than engaging it more fully in order to be part of transforming it.”¹⁸ This applies to racism throughout the United States and certainly includes our many interfaith and interreligious configurations.

Last year I was asked to participate in a panel discussion on race and racism at my seminary. This was the first time the organization hosted a public event to discuss this topic. In

¹⁷ Shelly Tochluk, *Living in the Tension: The Quest for a Spiritualized Racial Justice* (Roselle, N.J.: Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, Inc., 2016).

¹⁸ Shelly Tochluk, “Grounding: The Philosophical Foundation Beneath the Book *Living in the Tension: The Quest for a Spiritualized Racial Justice*,” <http://shellytochluk.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Grounding-LITT.pdf>.

my role as facilitator, I was very clear that race and racism would not be analyzed and solved to the satisfaction of 100 people (half of whom participated online) within a two-hour time span. Many attendees had building frustrations of racism being bypassed as a serious topic of discussion while others carried palpable anxiety that the conversation would end up in a heated argument.

By the close of the evening a variety of feelings were expressed. Some were grateful. Others were angry and frustrated. Some were disappointed. Others were inspired and pleasantly surprised. The success of the event in my view was measured by meeting the intention to make space for everyone regardless of how unsatisfied or happy people were in the end. At the very least our first conversation on race and racism was honest and participants expressed the desire to have more forums focusing on this issue. My hope was that the community dialogue would encourage the organization to delve more deeply into racism and racial bias. Fortunately, steps have been made to move in this direction.

I did not become an interfaith minister and educator to teach people about racism. I naively thought that “interfaith” described a place, movement, or philosophy that discovered the solution to this problem. Then I realized people in interreligious and interfaith settings are no less immune to the wider societal issues with which we all wrestle. It is unjust to expect interfaith ministers, educators, and advocates of color to carry this burden when we did not design, nor do we benefit from, institutionalized racial oppression. The first Parliament of World Religions in 1893 never intended to include someone like me—an African American woman who dares to publicly practice an indigenous African religion. Yet here I am.

During seminary, my first-year dean gave me a meaningful teaching that changed the course of all the work I did after I was ordained. My ancestors confirmed her guidance would always be life enhancing in my approach to serve others. The notecard she handed to me with my homework assignment said, “Trust is a matter of feeling safe. Reach out and be a bridge builder with the things you don’t trust.” Because I believe in a Divine presence that has no color other than what we humans project onto it, I consciously choose to stay engaged in interfaith and interreligious work. The inner struggle I went through to release and heal the internalized inferiority and oppression I was carrying has led me to believe it is possible to dismantle racism in our communities, this country, and the world at large.

For those who are interested in deepening the work of making interreligious and interfaith spaces places where all people are fully seen, heard, and affirmed, I offer questions that Reverend Durant and I created during our process of writing “If We Stay Silent, Injustice Will Persist.” The last question comes from the panel that I moderated on race and racism.

- 1) How and when do you experience being an insider or outsider in Interfaith spaces?
- 2) What does Internalized Superiority and Inferiority look and feel like in Interfaith spaces?
- 3) How do we reconcile our personal spiritual experience when we talk about race and religion in Interfaith community?

- 4) How do our places of identity affect/influence how we show up to address issues of racism in Interfaith community?
- 5) How does the silence around racism affect who feels welcome or who feels like they have to be less?
- 6) Does your spiritual practice and/or belief system emphasize a social responsibility that addresses racial oppression, prejudice, and bias?

I have personally witnessed interfaith education, interspiritual practice, and interreligious dialogues transform people’s lives in community. I have had the honor to support seminary students as they wrestled with challenges around belonging, exclusion, prejudice, and bias within a variety of situations. To ignore or minimize these issues as they pertain to the social construct of race and racism does a huge disservice to what the essence of an interfaith movement, philosophy, and ministry is supposed to stand for. To believe that it has no effect is to live in an illusion. Those who are called to be of service in this field should feel compelled to do the necessary inner work of becoming aware of the impact that racism has in their lives and the people around them. If some of us are not free from harm, none of us are. We need every heart and soul committed to eradicating racism if an interfaith vision of equality, inclusion, and love is to be a lived experience for everyone.

“Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” — James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

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