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RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN LITERATURE

BY BOOKER T. ANTHONY

President's Address Delivered at the  
Sixty-Seventh Annual Convention and  
Seventieth Anniversary of the College Language Association  
at Barry University at Miami Shores,  
Miami, Florida, April 19, 2007

When I was an undergraduate student at St. Augustine's College in the seventies, the late Dr. Charles A. Ray, professor of English at North Carolina Central University and former CLA president, began every lecture of the contemporary novel with a reference to a CLA scholar. I knew about Drs. Hugh Gloster, John W. Parker, Blyden Jackson, Nick Aaron Ford, Darwin T. Turner, and Richard Long as if they had come from Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*. Dr. Ray assured the class that one of us students would be privileged to meet one or two of these scholars and become a member of the College Language Association. As Ernest J. Gaines's Miss Jane says of one of the male characters, "You the One" (Gaines 199).

Yes, I was the "One," the one now given the daunting task of plodding along behind those brilliant minds who have addressed this august organization. My address

shall be threefold. First, for CLA members who have joined the organization in the last two to five years, we shall glimpse summarily at CLA's rich history. Second, we will consider the direction the CLA must sail as we prepare to bring the first decade of the new millennium to a close. Finally, we will consider the theme before us, "Religion and Spirituality in Literature."

The annual meeting of the College Language Association is the opportune time to reflect upon our history, to hear the current status of the association, and to assess the organization's future responsibilities to the academy. Nineteen thirty-seven should be as commonly known to the CLA member as George Orwell's 1984 is to the English major. It was in 1937 that a group of black scholars convened at LeMoyne College to establish an organization of college teachers of English and foreign languages, the purpose of which was to serve the academic, scholarly, and professional interests of its members and the collegiate communities they represent. What factors necessitated this new organ of communication in English studies?

Delivering her Presidential Address at the Fiftieth Anniversary Convention of the CLA in Washington, DC, April 24, 1987, Dr. Marie H. Buncombe appropriately awakens our conscience to a historical reality. First, during the Great Depression of the late twenties but especially of 1935, white writers had the *Southern Review* to promote their literary criticism of fiction and poetry. "It was in such a race-conscious American society," writes Dr. Buncombe, "that another group of college English teachers in the South was to mark another historic occasion by turning its attention to the concerns of Negro professors, scholars, students, and writers, with special emphasis of black literary and cultural experiences" (2). Hence, the birth of the College Language Association, or more accurately the Association of Teachers of English in Negro Colleges. (Of course the first historic occasion was the 1935 publication of Alain's Locke's *The New Negro*, followed two

years later by Sterling Brown's *Negro Poetry and Drama* and *The New Negro in American Fiction*.)

Scholars since 1937 salute LeMoyne College in Memphis, Tennessee, for opening its doors to black scholars. Today, language scholars nationally and internationally can join the Modern Language Association with the click of a pay-pal account, but in 1937, racial policies prevented blacks from becoming members of organizations like the Modern Language Association or from sending articles and publications to literary journals like the *Southern Review*.

If not the *Southern Review* or *Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)*, then what? "It was at this juncture," continues President Buncombe, "that the *CLA Journal* made its debut," specifically at the 1957 convention in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Prior to this time, Dr. Therman B. O'Daniel of Morgan State University had been editor of the *CLA Bulletin*. The CLA, as an organization, is as powerful an engine as the Internet, globally addressing the need of teachers of English to have a venue to examine how language and literature are taught. As President Ann Venture Young reminds us in her Presidential Address delivered at the forty-sixth annual CLA convention in Norfolk, Virginia, April 18, 1986, these annual meetings serve as the "chief vehicle for the achievement" of our goals with "paper-reading sessions, general sessions, business meetings, workshops, banquet and luncheon sessions, and cultural programs" (392). The *CLA Journal* has always been an equally vital service to the organization.

This is a good place to foray into the future of the College Language Association. The charge of the CLA Executive Committee, according to the CLA constitution, is to "recommend the policies of the association and transact all other business delegated to it by the association. It shall report its activities at each annual meeting, and its policies shall be subject to the direction and the approval of the association" (*CLA Constitution V.5.4*). The committee

conducts business at the pre- and post-convention meetings, Wednesday and Saturday, respectively. The future of the CLA rests proportionally on the policies discussed in the executive meetings and approved by the association in our annual Plenary Session II deliberations.

While Host Institution Committee chairpersons officially are not members of the Executive Committee, these persons are part of Executive Committee deliberations and contribute grandly to the success of the current convention. One question raised by the host committee concerned offering presentations and workshops that could be open to public sessions. These kinds of workshops assist the host institution in acquiring monies for the convention; enable public school teachers to earn continuing education units; encourage public school teachers to pursue graduate English and foreign language studies; and allow the CLA to dialogue with teachers about the study of language and literature, as well as about the entire crisis of public education. Once, blacks could not experience MLA. Are we now denying similar experiences to community teachers, who could easily become members of the CLA as associate members? What a powerful opportunity to expose public school and community college teachers to CLA's quality scholarship.

In an earlier paragraph, I referenced that the *CLA Journal* debuted in 1957 with Dr. Therman B. O'Daniel as editor. Delivering his Presidential Address at CLA's Twenty-six Annual Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, 1966, Dr. Milton Hardiman recognized the possibilities for this organ we call the *CLA Journal*. What was said of Dr. O'Daniel equally characterizes the scholarly contribution our current editor, Dr. Cason L. Hill, has made to the CLA. It was said of Dr. O'Daniel that "[t]he work of his hands and the patience which he exhibits produce for us a creation of art and give us a recognition in the literary world which is up to now the best publicity through which we keep abreast of the activities in which our various

members are engaged . . . we salute our editor” (Hardiman 4).

CLA, we salute Dr. Cason L. Hill. However, now we move and have our being in the age of cybernetics. Google, Blackboard, Smart Classrooms, Online degree programs, teleconferencing, and a plethora of other virtual, electronic experiences defy our current complacencies. While there are more questions than answers, we must begin to assess the vitality of our organ of communication in this new century. Would it be more cost-effective to prepare the journal in manuscript format or CDs? It is a fact that the journal is being subscribed to in several other continents. It is a fact that Diasporan studies entries are gaining interests worldwide. Should we have an index of articles and issues Online? Should we consider offers from other groups to index our journal? Is it time to change the design and cover of the journal? Should we make the journal available Online (with appropriate fees, however). How can the CLA assist in moving our nationally acclaimed, competitive organ into the twenty-first century?

A significant aspect of any organization is the work of standing committees. *Robert's Rules of Order* defines a standing committee as “a permanent part of the organization. Members of a standing committee usually change when new officers are elected, but the purpose of the committee and its functions and duties do not change” (202). If I may inject some levity, our chairs of standing committees are as permanent as the titles and duties appertaining thereto. We have thirteen committees, many of which have been dormant for several years. Recently, I sent letters to current committee chairs and asked the committees to convene this week to determine new charges and new names, where appropriate. Moreover, the committees have been charged by the executive committee to give reports in Friday's plenary business meet-

ing, especially where there are proposals to recreate committees.

In the language of fraternity and sororities, there is frequent reference to the life-blood of the Greek organization. Annual in-take orientation programs on college campuses, as well as in graduate chapters, are designed to recruit new members to maintain the life of these Greek societies. Smokers and rushes traditionally target freshman students, thus the life-blood of the Greek organization. Likewise, undergraduate and graduate scholars of language and literature represent the life-blood of the College Language Association. Our future and our vitality are directly proportional to our ability to serve as mentors to young scholars.

In this year's program, you will see more graduate panels labeled so that veteran scholars can provide better guidance to young writers and teachers. The CLA encourages more faculties to create graduate panels and an occasional undergraduate panel. Interestingly, the executive committee has received a proposal from an undergraduate English major, who, now a graduate student, proposes "a cooperative network between faculty and graduate students (and limited undergraduate students) of the College Language Association. This network will be most students' first introduction to English and foreign language scholarship, thereupon increasing participation at conventions and aiding in publicity and involvement on the college campuses. Ultimately, this formula is a failsafe way of ensuring the longevity and contemporary cultural validity of the Association" (Baxter). In addition, the newly formed CLA Student Executive Committee will have a representative on the CLA Executive Committee, thus allowing for possible mentorship opportunities for students and creating a voice for countless graduate and undergraduate institutions. Such a proposal would require a CLA sponsor or advisor at the student's institution, or a CLA institution, who would help the Student Executive

Committee compile student databases and organize a marketing and recruitment committee.

I wish I could take credit for this proposal, but the brainchild behind this idea is Wallis C. Baxter III, a graduate of Morehouse College and first-year graduate student at Duke University. If this proposal is approved by the association, Mr. Baxter will be instrumental in helping to launch the program into the twenty-first century.

My final observation relative to the future of the CLA highlights an addition to the CLA Program: Plenary Session III, the Friday Luncheon with Karla Holloway. When one scans the list of CLA Award Winners beginning with 2006 and Professor Bernard Bell and going back to 1966 with Professor Ruth T. Sheffey, one sees several in-house scholars who have made outstanding contributions to fiction, nonfiction, and literary theory and criticism. These CLA names have been in the vanguard of academic journals and language and literature classrooms for nearly fifty years. As an undergraduate, for example, I studied texts of Karla Holloway, Arthur P. Davis, Naomi L. Madgett, Trudier Harris, Frances Smith Harper, and Thadious M. Davis long before I would meet one of the authors at a convention. Colleagues, I say that it is time to honor our own. For reason, I implore you to institute the Plenary Session III Friday Luncheon every non-nomination year. Select as speakers Book Award Winners, as has been done this year with Professor Holloway. This is what lies ahead. May we turn, briefly now, our attention to the theme of this convention: *Religion and Spirituality in Literature*.

When the executive committee first deliberated over this theme, we had initially thought to call it *The Bible as Literature* or *The Bible and Literature*, modeled after many course titles in English departments. But we desired to avoid any suggestion of leading writers toward or away from what commonly is called "faith" or "belief." We have approximately seventy panels this year, including the ple-

nary and banquet lectures. The CLA Program Committee has arranged a smorgasbord of panels of topics from sermonic texts, black preaching, spiritual fanaticism, and the spiritual self, to occult readings in Francophone.

Why are language and literature scholars interested in religion and spirituality? From whence does the passion derive? Would the tenor of this convention be different had we said *Literature in Religion and Spirituality*? Is the same question raised when we change the preposition in the phrase *The Bible as Literature* to a coordinating conjunction in *The Bible and Literature*? Why does so much literature—American, British, and world—contain elements of religion and spirituality?

G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson, Jr., editors of *Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, state that “Religion . . . was there at the birth of literature” (11). T. S. Eliot calls it “religious literature.” Examine any world literature anthology, and “religious” titles inundate the table of contents: Gilgamesh; the Old Testament; the New Testament; the Bhagavad-Gita; St. Augustine; the Koran; the Middle English *Everyman* and the mystery plays; the *Canterbury Tales*; *Paradise Lost*; the *Divine Inferno*; *Song of Solomon*; *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; ad infinitum. Almost all the Greek and Roman dramas and epics contain some sense of the religious dimension, however broad. With Shakespeare, too, Tennyson and Ericson contend, “The stature of a Hamlet or a Lear is a function of the religious world-view that Shakespeare shared with his audience, for the Elizabethan plays are descendants of the medieval drama of religious inspiration, and the detachment of literature from religion has proved to be a slow and gradual matter. It is not really complete today, if indeed it ever can be. Can one argue that it is the literature?” (12).

It will be no wonder, then, that the papers you hear this week reflect a continuum of the religious dimension of literature. I submit that our ancestor writers of the Bible,

drama, poetry, fiction, and of any other genre, asked the same questions as writers do today. How did we arrive here? What is our purpose? Is there a supreme being over us? Are we like him or her? What is our future? Will we come in the same form, or can we determine our future corporeal existence? Why is life so short?

How the literary critic examines the texts which beg these questions becomes the crux of this conference. J. Hillis Miller, in an essay entitled "Literature and Religion," writes, "The problem arises when a critic, with his religious convictions, confronts the religious subject matter of a work of literature. Critics have usually chosen one of three characteristic ways of dealing with this problem. Each may lead to its own form of distortion. The critic may tend to assimilate writers according to his own religious belief. He may be led to reject writers because they do not agree with his religious views. He may tend to trivialize literature by taking an objective or neutral view towards its religious themes" (32). One may justly argue that it was this kind of forensics of a fiery nature that attracted us to literature.

One may submit, moreover, that literature, in its *utile* role, provides many lessons. I contend that we learn from characters whom we resemble or who resemble us. This thought leads me to the second component of the theme: Spirituality. We now know about religious literature, but why are we saying religion and spirituality? Again, do we apply the same distinction as we do with *The Bible as Literature* or *The Bible and Literature*? Thomas Paine writes in the *The Age of Reason*, "I believe in God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life" (867). Is his statement one of religion or spirituality? One of the most problematic maxims of the twentieth century comes from a statement made in 1887 by Fredrich Nietzsche: "God is Dead" (*Ideas Across Time*). Does this kind of attitude bring an end to religion or spirituality?

How do writers define religion and spirituality? *The American Heritage College Dictionary* offers several definitions of religion. One definition is “a belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator and governor of the universe.” But the definition that many people understand when it is said that a person can be religious about anything is, “A cause, principle, or activity pursued with zeal or conscientious devotion.” Ernest Gaines’s Miss Jane Pittman is religious about listening to her baseball games on Sunday mornings, but she “gets religion” and joins the church not long after her son Ned Douglass’ death and the incident with Harriet Black, who was physically beat to the point of insanity. Religion in Gaines’s fiction is not positive, for the ministers represent, as critic Mary Ellen Doyle states in *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*, “a relic, a reminder of the faith and worship that . . . young people have rejected at the cost of damaged family relations” (212). In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant Wiggins’s “barely veiled contempt,” continues Doyle, “must be converted into a genuine respect for the spiritual power that enables the minister to use the ‘white man’s faith’ against white injustice, and to ‘be there’ when he cannot” (212).

The “spiritual power” is this thing we call spirituality. To be spiritual, again, according to *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, is to have “the nature of spirit,” suggesting that the spirit, the nuema, or breath, or wind, has many dimensions. Hence, Professor Holloway’s text entitled *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison* is very appropriate, for the book analyzes Toni Morrison’s psychological and spiritual growth from novel to novel.

Spirituality, then, is not limited to worship on “Sundays.” In their introduction to Gaines’s recent book, *Mozart and Leadbelly*, editors Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young provide a clear distinction between religion and spirituality: “Anyone who has seen Gaines in such a set-

ting [as storyteller, that is] is well aware that he is very spiritual. It is important not to confuse religion and spirituality in this instance, because people often act religiously by going through the motions without substance or real commitment. As with many of his most memorable characters, his spirituality is not limited to a specific day and hour of the week, and it is not confined to the dictates of fallible human institutions. As Gaines himself has said:

My church is the oak tree. My church is the river. My church is walking right down the cane field road, on the headland between rows of sugarcane. That's my church. I can talk to God there as well as I can talk to him in Notre Dame. I think he's in one of those cane rows as much as he is in Notre Dame. (xix)

Spirituality here is likened to the Pantheism of the English Romantic poets as shown in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey": "And I have felt / A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime / of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of the setting suns, / And the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man: / A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things" (*Norton Anthology* 1434). There is the word *spirit*. Spirituality is the nature of being spiritual; being spiritual is having the nature of the spirit. Hence, spirituality is a "presence," a "motion and a spirit." Whether one is Hindu, Buddhist, nondenominational, atheist, or unaffiliated, it is being in touch with the sacred that connects our spiritualities.

In his most recent interview with Ernest Gaines, Darrell Bourque makes a similar observation about what stories like *A Lesson Before Dying* or "The Sky Is Gray" do to "crack us open" or to connect us to something beyond ourselves in the same manner as art or music does. "[W]e're not aware" writes Bourque, "that we're living in a time where there's a great need for spiritual rootedness" (140). Stories like *A Lesson Before Dying* put readers in touch

with “that spiritual rootedness, or being rooted in something that is sacred” (140).

One may dismiss religion, church, dogma, and ilk, but spirituality cannot be ebbd away, for divinity is rooted in every dimension of one’s life. Sitting next to a member of the congregation in a Methodist or Baptist church may reveal one’s religion but not one’s spirituality. Religion is static; spirituality is a journey. In his book entitled *With Eyes to See: A Journey from Religion to Spirituality*, Arthur Melville, a former Catholic priest who spent six years in the mountains of Guatemala, discovers that spirituality is one’s experience in life:

My religious experience has taught me the importance of distinguishing between religion and spirituality, the former basically believed in or adhered to and the latter primarily experienced. Not to make the distinction can lead to a repetitious, stifled, irresponsible life confused easily with service to God. Many religions with the original intent of leading to spiritual growth or harmony with Divine Consciousness have come to make their structure, ritual, tradition, and authority more important than the people whose consciousness they intended to influence. In doing so, they incite to conformity with a doctrine based on sin and fear of punishment—an unfortunate approach that, once believed, is eradicated only with difficulty. Such negative motivation inhibits creativity and qualities of freedom essential for harmony with the Divine. (83)

“Harmony with the Divine” takes us back to connecting to that which is sacred. Spirituality, then, is using one’s “intuitive sense, an inner guide, the voice of the Spirit” to grow psychologically, socially, and mentally (Melville 1).

In closing, I urge you to take advantage of as many panels as possible. Be persuaded to leave your beliefs at the door before entering a discussion. Enjoy the beauty of language and literature from the literary masters. Embrace ideas different from your own. We read to make ourselves better individuals. Our colleagues have labored arduously to provide stimulating papers and workshops on the theme. Let us reward them by filling up the rooms

through Saturday, 12 Noon. Thank you for coming to Miami. Enjoy the convention!

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