Remarks on the Occasion of the Thirty-Fifth Anniversary of the Publication of *"Is God A White Racist?"* by Dr. William R Jones.

Delivered at the Annual Meeting of HUUmanists, June 26, 2008, at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Fort Lauderdale, FL.

Participants: Rev. Mel Hoover, Dr. William Jones, Dr. Anthony Pinn, Ms. Norma Poinsett, Rev. Bill Sinkford, Rev. Archene Turner, Dr. Sharon Welch.
Moderator: Rev. Wendy Jerome; Host and organizer: Dr. David Schafer.

To predict a person's behavior you must understand the cognitive structure - that world view that operates as their theory-in-use - not their espoused theory. To illustrate: a minister is doing a catechism on Heaven, and asks everybody, "How many people believe in Heaven? (Lots of people put their hands up). How many people think Heaven is a good place? How many think Heaven's the best place? (People keep their hands up). How many of you want to go there?" Then he said, "How many are willing to go there?" Then he said, "How many of you are willing to die tomorrow to go to Heaven?" Not a single hand goes up. Not a single hand.

MODERATOR: Bill Sinkford brings us greetings and words of welcome. He is the President of our Unitarian Universalist Association and we warmly welcome him today.

BILL SINKFORD:
In my service as President, my relationship with this community has not always been the easiest. That may be an understatement. So I want to tell you a couple of things that I said to the UU University, (pre-GA leadership courses – *ed*.) when I preached for them at the opening of this General Assembly. One was that we have some spiritual work to do, and we continue to have spiritual work to do around our ability to welcome the use of the Christian metaphor here. In fact, I talked about Unitarian Universalism, not just this community, but also the whole community being "Christian-phobic." My message on that score was met with, I think, the mixed results I expected it to be. The second [thing] was that all Unitarian Universalists are Humanists - understood in the broad meaning of that term. That we all understand that ours are the only hands on Earth, and if we going to move towards the beloved community, it is only our work that can do that. That part of my message was, broadly, well received at UU University.

Bill Jones, I am so glad that you are being honored by this group. You are one of the people on whose shoulders I stand each and everyday. I remember so vividly reading your book, "Is God a White Racist?" I read it in the late 1980s, and it was a period in my life when I had been estranged from Unitarian Universalism for some years. I remember reading it and being blown away by the scholarship and blown away by the kind of perspective you brought on the Christian tradition and the questions you asked. I remember finishing the book and reading what I remember to be the last sentence, which was, "Let the debate begin." [1] And at that point, I believed that you were speaking for Unitarianism, at that time we were in the conversation, and trying to make that conversation a better one by our presence.

In my ministry as the President of the Association that has been a central part of my work - trying to bring us back into the conversation in the religious world, to have our voice be an important component in that conversation. But the thing that really moved me as I read the book, as an African American, was reading it and thinking, "My goodness, maybe it is really possible for me to engage fully with Unitarian Universalism. If Bill Jones can do it, perhaps I too can do it."

There [are] other ways that I stand on your shoulders. I cannot tell you how often it is that I use your stuff. I use your "do your sociology before you do your theology" all the time. I use other pieces of your wisdom, [such as] "Diagnosis determines treatment." I cannot tell you in how many sermons that has appeared. And it has been a gift to know you and to know your commitment, and your long service in so many ways. Mostly, I wanted to let you know how important you are to me, Bill. And, I hope that you will be important to me for a good, good, good long time yet.

I'm glad that this group is meeting; you have important work to do. Not [just] business, although that is important as well, but dealing with some of the issues that are at the forefront of our faith. Continue to keep up with what's happening in a rapidly changing religious landscape, but also understand what it is that we have to contribute to that landscape. Which means in simple terms, to exercise our leadership.

MODERATOR:
Today we have come together to honor the legacy of Bill Jones. Teacher, scholar, Unitarian Universalist minister, Bill has influenced our movement for more than five decades. He is perhaps best known as the author of the 1973 landmark book, "Is God A White Racist?" He is the author of over twenty-five articles and books and chapters, including a notable 1975 piece in the Christian Century, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows." Bill spent most of his academic career as a professor of religion at Florida State University in Tallahassee, beginning in 1977. [He was also] the first director of the Black Studies program there. He has a PhD in Religious Studies from Brown, and was ordained into our ministry in 1958. He had much influence in our movement throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s, [particularly with] a younger generation of scholars and ministers.

Dr. Anthony Pinn is professor of Humanities and Religions Studies and the Director of Graduate studies at Rice University in Houston, TX. He has a PhD from Harvard, and he previously taught at McAllister College in St. Paul, MN. He's the Executive Director of the Society for the Study of Black Religion and a long-time leader in the American Academy of Religion's Black Theology group. His most recent book is "Terror and Triumph, The Nature of Black Religion." He is the author or editor of fifteen other books including, "By These Hands", a documentary history of African American Humanism as well as, "Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology." About five years ago he become a member of the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Houston, TX.

ANTHONY PINN
One often stumbles across treasures moving through a library; the search for one text across any particular shelf can result in the discovery of others. I treasure this approach to the library in part because it was due to it that I first encountered Dr. Jones' *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* in the stacks of Andover Library at Harvard Divinity School.

How could I resist picking up that book? I was a PhD student struggling to make sense of the shifting nature of my personal theology and the linkage between that transformation and my academic work: I had entered the Master of Divinity degree program committed to practical ministry in the African Methodist Episcopal Church based on a rather conservative theology, and now I found wanting both that vocation and the theology that had guided me for years.

To say the least, I was suspicious of the Christian faith I had embraced most of my life, but lacked the theological language to express this suspicion and certainly lacked the means to articulate an alternate vision. I was quickly learning my religious sensibilities and theological vocabulary were limited in real ways to the Christian worldview that had shaped me, but that now seemed to strangle me. And that vocabulary was becoming inadequate for addressing the deep pain and suffering marking life in this world.

But in Dr. Jones' work I found a way to think about my personal transformation and to think academically about the "flaws" of the larger framework of African American religious thought and theology. His book offered me a portrait of academic courage and an outline of personal tenacity and strength. The book provided the intellectual purview I needed, and I wanted to learn more from Dr. Jones. My friends had a difficult time with my shifting theological and religious direction, but I was convinced Dr. Jones would understand and would be sympathetic. I wrote him and asked if he'd be willing to mentor to me, to help me better articulate my shifting religious and theological commitments. Dr. Jones, as one might imagine, was gracious and generous.

That initial letter was followed by a phone call during which I asked to meet with him if he were ever in Boston. To my amazement, he told me he would be in Boston within the next several days, and would be more than willing to sit and talk. I was delighted, and that initial conversation on Beacon Hill in Boston marked what has been for me an ongoing wrestling with his brilliant critique of theodical concerns, systematic racism, and the framing of ethics. This was for me the beginning of a journey, and I will always be grateful to Dr. Jones for his guidance.

Some thirty-five years after its initial publication, *Is God a White Racist?* remains a challenging text, one that I – as a humanist, and others from a Christian perspective – have only inadequately addressed. Perhaps this is because we have read the book simply as a challenge to a doctrine of God, an effort to dismantle philosophically divinity, a limited attack on one dimension of African American liberation theology as systemic theology.

I want to understand as significant this challenge to supernaturalism and a turn to religious naturalism vis-à-vis an interrogation of the doctrine of God as vital, particularly in that synergy between doctrine of God and Christology, has resulted in a rationale for various sorts of behavior. This is because these two theological categories serve to buttress the somewhat flawed but dominant orientation within African American religious circles – even when African American religious (or Christian) thought is understood as representing what Jones labels humano-centric theism. The activity of God within the context of human life is the source of theological energy. It is this preoccupation with the presence of the divine within the context of human existence that frames Black theology and Black religion (in Black churches) as encompassing theistic humanism.

Black theology, particularly in the writings of Cone, affixes doctrine of God and theological anthropology in a rigid manner, through a process of correlation – to speak of one is to speak of the other. "We," Cone argues, "can know God only in relationship to the human race, or more particularly in God's liberating activity in behalf of oppressed humanity." [2] Even

with this said, it remains understood that God is not captured, nor fully known through human experience. Historical reality only provides a glimpse of God, but one that affirms the importance of and integrity of human life. Jones offered a theological bridge – a way of maintaining the basic commitment to liberation expressed in black theology but without some of its more damaging assumptions. He accomplished this through the presentation of humano-centric theism, which is an approach already akin to much of what frames black theology.

I must admit that, from my perspective, more intriguing than Jones' call for humano-centric theism (as a stop-gap of sorts) is the gentle presentation of his preferred orientation – secular humanism and its accompanying theological perspective, both grounded in a healthy regard for existential context and human accountability.

When this last portion of the book is considered fully, one might argue that what Jones has offered is more than a denial of God, more than a challenge of theological continuity and consistency. The theologically and religiously inflammatory nature of the book title captures attention, and we feel compelled to respond in some way; but it betrays the larger significance – and perhaps it is this larger agenda and aim that accounts for Dr. Jones not providing a follow-up text in which he outlines in more detail his notion of humanism.

Allow me to pause and make a confession: For some years now I have wanted to read this next text, to read in a sustained argument his response to critiques and his creative expression of a humanism that might repair, if not replace, the gaps and blind spots of African American religious thought and life. But perhaps I have failed to fully appreciate the nature and meaning of Dr. Jones' humanism, particularly as housed in his long and distinguished association with the Unitarian Universalist Association.

That is to say, perhaps the anticipated and promised follow-up to *Is God a White Racist?* is a matter of praxis, of performance – a modeling of humanism as opposed to presentation of abstractions. Could Dr. Jones actually respond to his critics in productive ways by simply offering alternate theological argumentation and ritual structures when African American Christian theology lacks sustained interest in historical proof and religious pluralism (beside, I would argue, a few exceptional figures such as Howard Thurman)? In much Black theology, biblical pronouncements trump the history of African American people. If nothing more, as Theophus Smith and Vincent Wimbush suggest, the biblical text becomes a talisman, a source of conjuration used to coat or code black experience.

Dr. Jones, through his ongoing work related to systemic racism and mechanisms for recognition and dismantling racism, has responded to his critics in African American liberation theology by modeling the type of sustained attention to injustice they demand, but offer in a somewhat spotty manner. And, maybe, just maybe, such an approach is the most reasonable approach when one considers the non-creedal nature of Jones' humanism. In this way, theology becomes a method for exploring the human quest for complex subjectivity, for meaning and purpose.[3] This perspective need not lead away from an interest in the questions and meanings of religion, but rather into a different posture towards those questions, one disinterested in the Gods of Black (and Womanist) theology and one more firmly and comfortable concerned with anthropology as the starting and ending point of religious questioning.

That is to say, Jones suggests through his ongoing work – including his UUA involvements – the proper response to theodical arguments: Not creeds, not theological argumentation – rather ethics. Isn't that our way, the foundational and shared structure of our self-understanding as Unitarian Universalists? There is a guiding principle not instituted by the divine, but rather based on a hard-to-hold feeling that life should be nurtured in its various forms.

One may not be able to talk in terms of a universal ethic, but one can talk in vague terms about a desire for health and well-being, recognizing that what this means is not fully within our grasp, and that it is likely we will betray even this vague urge. The nurturing of this web of existence is Jones's preoccupation, as I understand it – providing both a theological anchor and a motivation for ethics.

If in any way this is to the point, I have learned a great lesson from Dr. Jones, although it has taken me a good number of years. This lessons involves the nature of the humanist life lived. I'd like to close with a few thoughts, a matter of speculation, as a way of giving you some sense of my take on Dr. Jones' response to critiques as practice.

For the African American humanist, life difficulties and anxiety are never fully resolved, but mitigated through an appeal to human potential, expressed in celebration of the human: his/her body, vision, integrity – without appeal to a trans-historical partner. For the humanist, the outcome of life (what Christians might call salvation) entails a process of self-realization and the potentiality of transformation as a human project.

An under-girding sensitivity to human integrity involves an embrace of humanity over against deep feelings of guilt that can only be addressed through surrender to the God/man, Jesus. This is not an understanding of one's will as trumping all others. Unlike the black Christian Tradition's take on the subject, realization for the humanist is not the end of trouble (no God to guarantee this through the completion of the liberation project), but rather the forging of an identity better capable of wrestling with the alienation and other oppressive tendencies that mark life in the world. This perspective does not escape metaphysics altogether in that it speaks to a concern with the nature of being and existence; but unlike the black Christian perspective, metaphysics here is without grounding in a notion of a divine reality outside time and space. It, unlike the black Christian perspective, remains rather bleak. However, a theological assessment premised on humanist sensibilities does not find it so troubling.

A distinction between this humanist perspective and that of black liberation theology involves the nature of passion and urgency involved with both – the deeply disturbed tone of black liberation theologies and the more measured, dispassionate tone of humanist theological formulations. This difference does not stem from a lack of concern with oppression and the oppressed within humanist theological frameworks. Rather, it stems from humanists' recognition of the absurd nature of life, and the notion that we construct this world alone, without divine guidance and the balance – the hopefulness of hope – such guidance provides.

It is the realization that our will for positive transformation may not constitute enough force to bring about desired change. Black Christian Tradition posits something after human history, and even black liberation theologies that hold talk of heaven suspect, do not rule out the plausibility of something beyond human history in that God exists. What humanists seek in terms of self-realization within the context of community is partial in that the human remains the resident of a world determined to restrict identity and life meaning. The humanist speaks in ways that are preoccupied with the present, the black Christian Tradition with the past (the Christ event) and future (end of human history). In this respect, the very acts of living within the context of community involve sacraments of sorts, rituals (e.g., repeated activities in founded spaces) of the ordinary.

If this is in any way consistent with the lessons Dr. Jones sought to teach, I thank him. If, however, I have failed to capture his point – the purpose of his work –I ask his forgiveness and I ask that readers recognize my effort in this short reflection as a sign of continued appreciation for his writings.

MODERATOR:
Dr. Sharon Welch is the Provost at Meadville Lombard theological School, our Unitarian Universalist Seminary in Chicago. She has a PhD in Psychology from Vanderbilt and previously taught at Harvard and the University of Missouri. Her areas of specialization are: religion and social change, the spiritual and ethical challenges of multiculturalism, post-colonial religious ethics, and peacemaking. Her most recent books, is, "*After Empire: The Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace.*" She is also well known for her earlier book, "*The Feminist Ethic of Risk*." Sharon is a long-time Unitarian Universalist.

SHARON WELCH:
One of the things I find as a scholar is how often you read something that changes how you see the world. From reading I have done of the work of Dr. William Jones, and the things we've done together in workshops, not only how I see the world has changed, but how I live. How I live everyday as a teacher, as a citizen, as a human being striving for what Tony Pinn calls "complex sensitivity" in a world fraught with power and oppression, and possibilities for liberation, transformation, and joy.

I am going to share with you reflections on a research project that I was involved with for ten years at the University of Missouri. It's a project grounded in Dr. William Jones's work and his approach to an analysis of oppression, and to the advocacy of creative ways of responding to that oppression. I want to tell you something about the milieu and how fortunate it was for us in Columbia, MO, to encounter the work of Dr. Jones when we did. I came to Columbia fresh from teaching at Harvard Divinity School for nine years, certain that I knew the answers to every single form of oppression. I knew with students we could deconstruct sexism, racism, classism and homophobia, and how they interacted. I knew the students would be so delighted to hear this insightful analysis in Feminism 101 and Religious studies 101!

But one of the things that surprised me was that the students hated this analysis. They did not believe the literature they read, the statistics that were presented, or the speakers who told of their own history. We realized there was something awry in our approach to working for justice. [I'll include] a word here about the context… the University of Missouri is a predominately white campus with 20,000 students. Of these, 75% self-identify as conservative. An additional 10% identify as very conservative, 10% as liberal and maybe 5% progressive. Most students are working class - either first generation college students or people who used to be middle class. Many were at the University of Missouri because their parents had been downsized - they no longer had the money to attend private schools. In going to a state school instead, most of the students had a sense of economic marginalization.

My research project began by looking at students in the College of Education, where there was a systematic attempt from the first year to make sure that every teacher understood the nature of oppression, and their responsibility as teachers in a democratic society to understand and overcome injustice. We examined why students resisted and hated the classes, why [they] challenged some of our pieties as liberals and progressives working for justice [and] our emphasis on multicultural education. They spoke of classroom experiences where professors talked at them rather than with them, and of professors who had no respect for or understanding of them and their social location.

I was chastened and saddened to admit that they were right. We didn't respect these students from predominately white, rural, and suburban backgrounds. We didn't respect that the

image they were given of race relations was one that they saw on Oprah and popular television where "everything is alright now" because in every show everybody has at least one black friend, (an image that suggests) that the problems have been solved and they have been solved by basic American values of hard work.

Into this milieu, Dr. William Jones came to a workshop that was co-sponsored by Women's Studies (where I was director) and African American studies. He taught us the Grid of Oppression[4] as a way of diagnosing, analyzing and thinking through. He challenged us to apply this grid to our predominately white, conservative, and working class students, to see whether it would help them understand the contours of oppression in their world. "Don't just take my word for it. If this is going to work," he said, "test it."

I taught courses in multicultural education for teachers. I want to share with you some of the results of this multi-year research project with elementary and secondary teachers in a very conservative part of Missouri, in which we began every class with Dr, Jones's Grid of Oppression.

"Who are you? Where do you come from? Who are your people? Show us. Draw a symbol of something that you are proud of in your culture. Think about your home, the community, and the landscape. The people and animals that share your world. What are some of the things that you cherish about where you live?" With these simple questions, we begin. With crayons, white sheets of paper, and laughter. Naming the sources: land and place, people, friends and family that ground us, that grace our lives with a sense of belonging and purpose, honoring our ancestors and our companions, human and other than human on the journey of life.

Preparing ourselves for a journey into another world, we begin grounded in gratitude for all which sustains us. From here we will explore worlds of horror, of cruelty and exploitation, of conflict, of century's long struggle for integrity and freedom. And we have knowledge that the way will be hard. We will disagree and disagree deeply about things that are of the utmost importance. Although our intent is to learn together, we will say things that are offensive and harmful. Given the cost and given the risk, how do we take the conflicts we will have, and the pain we will cause, and learn from them?

Having worked the alchemy that conflict and pain honestly faced can bring, there is a deepening of community and relationship, and not the end of relationship. In this class, before we study the work of other people or think carefully about oppression in its many forms, we begin by clarifying our own views. Each student writes a short paper answering the following questions based solely on their own, previous experience, education and insights:

- What is the purpose of multicultural education?
- What are your goals as a teacher?
- What aspects of your cultural background affect your teaching?
- How just is American society?
- How close are we to fulfilling our ideals of liberty and justice for all?

While the response to the questions varied slightly among these conservative, white students, Sandra's responses are quite typical.

Sandra has taught Social Studies to nine- and ten-year-olds for eleven years in a public school in a small Missouri town. She is also the Social Studies Coordinator for her elementary school of 435 students. Her commitment to her vocation is clear:

> From the beginning, I have felt that my purpose has been to teach children. My main goal is to teach each and every student in my classroom to love themselves. And, of course, I always strive for students to value reading and to improve in reading skills.

Sandra identifies her main strength as her love of children. Although she is somewhat interested in multicultural education, she acknowledges that she hasn't thought much about injustice. She has not been trained to either see injustice or to work actively to rectify injustice. She is however, a committed, loving teacher. And throughout the course, her views of how to express that love will change dramatically.

We begin our work together, meeting as a class of twenty-ine, four hours a day, four days a week, for two and half weeks. At the end of this intense period of study and reflection, many students undergo a radical change – in their understanding of American society, and of their role as educators, and as people with privilege within that society. Sandra's change in perspective, though certainly dramatic, is far from atypical:

> In my first paper, I wrote that we are (not) far from our founding fathers' intentions in many areas. However, I totally disagree with that notion because our founding fathers slaughtered thousands of Native Americans, used women on a regular basis, and tortured blacks routinely without guilt. What was the intention of our founding fathers? Many wanted religious freedom and opportunities; many were fueled by greed. It hurts to think about all of the death and destruction that our history has experienced to put us to where we are today.

Sandra's sense of her whiteness has changed significantly:

> My cultural background as a white female affects my teaching more than I would ever have liked to believe.

Now her goals as a teacher have changed. Rather than simply loving students and helping them learn to love themselves, her goals are far more extensive:

> Promote equality, self-esteem, equal opportunities in school. To reduce prejudice and stereotyping among parents and students. To encourage critical thinking and problem solving and prepare citizens to work to promote change in society for structural equality and cultural pluralism.
>
> I definitely have my work cut out for me but change has to begin somewhere.

For Sandra, the change began with a simple exercise that I am sure many of you have experienced. Developed by Dr. William Jones, it is known as the as the Grid of Oppression. This is what we do (you can let me know if we horribly, horribly misused it). On the first day of every class, we begin with a very simple exercise that leads to profound transformation and political understanding. As you saw in the case of Sandra, it moves from a sense of loving people as individuals to seeing systemic injustice. We realize that many people in the United States, especially people who are white, have not been taught to think systemically and they resist any

kind of systemic exercise. Dr. Jones's Grid of Oppression helps people see the systems at work in their own lives.

The class is divided into small groups and I ask each group to name the most powerful institutions in their community. The answers fly: banks, large family-owned businesses, the police force, local and state governments, schools, hospitals, military bases, universities, influential churches, the newspaper, radio and TV stations, large corporations. I then ask them to analyze an institution, where they have personal knowledge (this is a key point), not something they've read about. It has to be a police force they know, a church they know, or a business they know. I ask them to identify the individual or the group of people has the most power in that system. The answers are obvious: The school board, the owners of media, and the chief of police. The next answers however are not so obvious, but are stark. I ask them to identify that person or group of people by race, gender, class and presumed sexual orientation. While there are a few women and persons of color in leadership positions, the majority of these positions are held by white, upper class, presumably heterosexual men. We can then test these results, asking: "This is so strange, it must be a fluke. Surely where you all live, your towns can't all be reflective of what the United States is like in 2002 or in 1998." And so we try to think of institutions in which the majority of decision making positions are held by African Americans, by people of Hispanic descent – people who are Latino/Latina, by people who are homosexual, transgender, lesbian. While there are some exceptions, the class quickly realizes the distribution of power in the United States, economically and politically, is far from equitable.

The students do name a few institutions in which African Americans have power: citing a few mayors, some governors, Black churches, the NAACP and historically black colleges. We then ask another question from Dr. Jones: under which of these institutions, in which African Americans have primary leadership power, under which of these institutions do Whites *have* to live? With the rare exception of a governorship, none. The students know that Whites have been free to leave such situations, free, for example, to leave large cities and move to predominately White suburbs.

There is more to the exercise and more to the work. But from this beginning, helping people see their own world in a new way, without blame, without denouncing from the outside, we can then elicit together what our role is as agents of justice. As people whose values are ones of equity and compassion, how can we best work together? One last point, which is so important from Dr. Jones's work: he points out that racism mutates, oppression mutates. With this grid, people have an ongoing marker, a way of seeing how they are able to change the institutions in which they live, and to see the way the institutions in which they live maintain imbalances of power.

This is the work of multicultural education: we listen; we learn, we mourn, we rage. We remain open to the suffering around us. We acknowledge with wonder and joy the rich threads of human connection that bind us to the past and to the future. We participate in the work of many generations, those who have seen injustice, those who have denounced injustice, to those who have given their lives for justice. We remain open to pain, to possibility, and to change. In the words of Patrick Chamoiseau, in his novel Texaco, "Write The Word? No. But tie the knot with life again, yes."[5] Dr. Jones: thank you for teaching us how to tie the knot.

MODERATOR:
The Reverend Archene Turner is a Unitarian Universalist minister and graduate of the Meadville Lombard Theological School where she received a Masters in Divinity. She was ordained by the

Unitarian Universalist churches of Arlington, VA and All Souls Unitarian in Washington, D.C. this past December (2007). Archene comes from a family of [Christian] ministers, but her home is in Unitarian Universalism. She works full-time as a patent examiner in inorganic technology at the United States patent and trademark office and part-time as a coordinator for Youth Ministries at Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist church in Bethesda. Her ambition is to build an academy in Washington, D.C based on Unitarian Universalist principles, to educate children and youth who are in the foster care system as well as our local Unitarian Universalist youth. Her current project is providing comprehensive sexuality education to non-UU Washington area youth who may not receive this in their own contexts and to youth in LGBT families who are outside of religious homes.

ARCHENE TURNER:
Many of us are very familiar with the experience that people have, when they come through the doors of our UU congregations. There's a coming-home kind of process that occurs. I had that experience (at a UU church), and it was very similar when I read Dr. Jones's book, *"Is God A White Racist?"*

When I was six years old, my father had a dream: God called him to anoint me to become a minister. This was a radical event, because while my family was culturally Christian, we were only occasionally going to church. But two years later, my parents became saved and when I was age fourteen, both of them became ordained Christian ministers.
I used to tell people that my parents were non-denominational, but it sure felt Baptist - it seemed like everyone was being sent to Hell.

When I was thinking this morning about what I was going to say to you today, I actually asked my father (I am staying with them during General Assembly) "what particular strain of Christianity are you?" He now claims the Church of God. It's very, very Trinitarian. So imagine this fourteen-year old every Sunday morning, when the altar call came. I dreaded it. My parents would spend twenty minutes preaching as to why you sinners had to accept Jesus Christ as your lord and savior, just for God to take care of you.

When my parents were not in the pulpit, I would hear other preachers talking about this God of the oppressed. I didn't feel too oppressed. I was raised in a home that taught me I could do anything I wanted to do, but that I had to be responsible for my actions. So, I started asking why God wasn't responsible for his actions? Why does He get credit (only) when good things happen in the world, and if He is that powerful, why do people suffer? I quickly learned not to voice those questions in my family. I became what I call a closeted Humanist.

I find it fascinating that I had the courage to come out to my conservative parents as a lesbian at seventeen years old. But it was many, many years later before I had the courage to come out to them as a Humanist. I was able to wrestle up that courage because I read one book, Dr. Jones' *"Is God A White Racist?"* Bill gave me the ammunition I needed in my life to be able to defend my faith with my parents and the Black community. But, I think Bill gave me something much, much more. He allowed me to reintegrate my life and become whole again, and for that I am forever grateful.

I have been coming out more and more as a religious Humanist and I have been boldly articulating that position in many, many places where other different religious traditions and conversations dominate, because I want to be able to bring this lifesaving message to people who might not otherwise receive it. Now, I can stand as a minister and give this good news and to continue the work around Humanism so that more people can hear this liberating message.

(The next two presenters, Rev. Mel Hoover from DRUUMM, and Norma Poinsett, co-recipient with Dr. Jones of the Melvin J Hoover Beloved community Award, spoke without introduction as Bill came to the microphone)

MEL HOOVER
What a gift we have in Bill Jones. It was through Bill in many ways that I came into Unitarian Universalism. I was involved in a lot of justice and anti-racism work, seeking a faith perspective congruent with what I was doing; I wasn't finding it in my Episcopal faith. I almost came into Unitarian Universalism at the end of the Sixties. I thought I had finally found a faith, which was living out its principles. I watched James Reeb (*UU minister martyred in the civil rights struggle – ed*) and other UUs from this White denomination respond to the Call to Selma. That was an important moment, because it broke loose other White participation, which caused the nation to pay attention.

But I found that Unitarian Universalist was a racist faith too. Surprise, surprise! I backed off and felt I drifted, creating (my own) faith for quite a while, trying to find ways to sustain myself. I too picked up that book, in the Eighties. I said there is still a call and there's still a need and this man was already staying in touch. Why is he in this UU faith? Is he crazy?
And then I met him. I met a human being who cares about this faith, who cares about White relationships and has never been afraid to tell the truth as he knew it. I had found an elder that I could trust and that I could follow. I am representative of many of us, especially those of us of color ( I am going to be particular here) who have found that we have survived in this faith because of Bill Jones being here, and letting us know he cared, and telling us to stick with it. Stay with it!. You were the best White folks around to try to do something with. "But don't be surprised if we never get to the Promised Land," he also says.
I'll never forget one illustration Bill used. How many of you know about the chicken? You know the chicken? Bill said: "I want to talk to you about power. How many people here like chicken? Raise your hand. Now, how do you get chicken? How do you get chicken? Eggs? You murder them. We murder chickens. Now if chickens had guns, do you think we would eat chickens so much? That's power."
That's a real understanding of power and we can't be in denial about that. The power of Bill is his humanity and his sense of and commitment to creating beloved community. Now I have Norma Poinsett with me. Some of you know Ms. Norma, right? Last night at our Diverse and Revolutionary Multicultural Ministries meeting, the DRUUMM Organization presented an award. Norma Poinsett was the recipient of this year's Beloved Community award.

NORMA POINSETT:
I'm Unitarian Universalist, but I was Baptist first, and like Archene, I was never a good Baptist. I found there's a lot of good people, besides my good family in this world. It was 1958 when I became a Unitarian Universalist and found very soon that first church in Chicago was one of the few Unitarian churches that had several Black congregants. At the same time, the whole association was not like that. Somehow, I got started trying to help change things locally; a lot of you know that I have been involved in trying to help make this association more human and more loving and caring for people.

Somewhere along the way, I met Bill Jones. I will never be as intellectual as he is or as deep; or write as many books. But he has always respected me as one of the persons who has helped carry this association along. We still have much to do, Bill and I. I enjoy working with him, going to the many workshops he's held. I don't know anyone who has given more of their weekends. I don't know how he writes so much. One of things I have found he always takes his computer with him. I don't think he sleeps at all at night because the night he spent at my home, he wrote all night, I do believe.
Bill is like my big brother that I will always admire. I can't say enough good things about him. I am so glad that he is looking good; he looks happy, he looks healthy. I hope that he stopped writing so much and started taking more care of himself. And, Bill with that, I want to present you with this award, The Melvin J. Hoover Beloved Community Award, the same as one that I received last night. I will read the words:
*In recognition of outstanding contributions to Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries and to people of color within the Unitarian Universalist Association this award is presented to Dr. William R. Jones*
*27th of June, 2008*

WILLIAM JONES
Strange occasion! When I first heard about it and was asked to be here, I began to hear between the lines… this sense that you have when you feel that people are honoring you when you can still smell the roses. I was not aware that I was going to be leaving you soon. Perhaps you know something that I haven't heard from my doctors yet. (*Voice from audience… "You are looking so much better than we expected.*") I am in pretty good health. I am mostly excited about the recent research that I am in the process of completing. I'm ready to renew the debate and kick butt!

I'd like to give you a little idea of where I am now in relation to the work you are most familiar with, namely *"Is God A White Racist?"* I started out as a religious fundamentalist. Billy Graham was my idol. As a teenager, I went around preaching biblical prophecy. I was damn good at it; I know how to do that. I know how to do that. Now, I am on the other side of the theological spectrum; some of my friends in theology, particularly Black theology don't consider me to even be *on* the spectrum, because of some of my radical and revolutionary beliefs, which I really feel are quite normal if you look at things from the right perspective. (Before I wrote the book) I had decided that because of the association I was detecting between the theology of religion that my grandfather taught me, and the oppression that I and my colleagues, and family were experiencing – that to get rid of oppression, we had to eradicate religion. That's where I was at that time. That was a wrong perception. It was inaccurate because I had not come in contact with some of the Black social thinkers like Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois who have since been most influential in my understanding of the methodology of what we are trying to do.

What I learned from Carter G. Woodson was the following: "if you want to control a person's actions, you control their beliefs and values. If you are able to do that, he said, you do not have to *tell* a person to go to the backdoor. What he had in mind was this experience of oppression where Black people… if we were traveling, I mean we had to carry chicken and stuff in a shoebox. Howard Johnson's wasn't open to us then, but you might be able to go to a restaurant and go to the backdoor and one of the Black cooks would sell you something. That is why he said if you control people's minds, you don't have to *tell* them to go to the backdoor.

They will do it on their on accord. And, if there is no backdoor, they will make one for their own convenience. His punch line was this. "His education makes it necessary."[6] Their socialization makes it necessary.

Woodson is saying… that every person has a[n espoused] belief and value system. We each also have a cognitive system and it is this cognitive system that determines how we [actually] respond to things. My grandfather used to preach: "the harder the cross, the brighter the crown. The more I suffer here; the better is going to be for me on the other side." What are the practical socioeconomic implications of that one belief, if I am at the bottom of the social ladder with most of the worst and the least of the best? How will I respond to that situation if I take the "harder-the-cross-the-brighter-the-crown principle" and use it to determine what I am going to do? (I will accept oppression. Yet we struggle against oppression.)

To predict a person's behavior you must understand the cognitive structure - that world view that operates as their theory-in-use - not their espoused theory. To illustrate: a minister is doing a catechism on Heaven, and asks everybody, "How many people believe in Heaven? (Lots of people put their hands up). How many people think Heaven is a good place? How many think Heaven's the best place? (People keep their hands up). How many of you want to go there?" Then he said, "How many are willing to go there?" Then he said, "How many of you are willing to die tomorrow to go to Heaven?" Not a single hand goes up. Not a single hand.

What they gave by raising their hands was a description of their "espoused theory." It's what they preach. It is what they want you to believe they will do and how they will respond. But your theory-in-use is what you actually practice. I have to determine your world view; your operative, normative world view by making inference not from your creed, but from… your deeds. Now when you get that kind of precise knowledge of the deed-factor in a person's worldview, you can literally predict what they [will] do. And, that has been part of my approach from the very beginning: how to predict and thereby also control and manipulate human behavior? Why do I say that? Because I am trying to explain to you that what I have done, what I continue to do and I argue, it is the same for all of you… no matter what we do, when, where, why and how… we are trying ultimately to enhance our survival and our well-being (through our theory-in-use.. That is the self-interested factor that informs each and every thing we do.

I have a perception or an idea how things work. And, I put it out there as a universal, empirical hypothesis. Universal, empirical hypothesis. Then I ask you, to give me one exception. If I make a universal claim and you give me one exception, you have done right. You have "dis"proven what I said. You knocked it down. However, if you cannot give me one exception, you've got to give me a little more wiggle room on this principle. You at least have to acknowledge that it is a possible perspective that should have [a place on] the conference table. That is the basis on which every single principle by which we operate gets into the mix. If you can show me an exception, then I have to take it off the table. [Staying on the table] is the basis for the prediction.

*(At this point an announcement was made that time is running out)*

This is my basic principle: oppression is a foundational human behavior. Everything I say follows from that. At the organic level of life, in order to survive, you have to feed on something other than yourself. Give me an exception! You can't do it. In order to survive at the organic level, you have to feed on something other than yourself. Now, what does that say? We didn't create that reality. Its one that we were born into, and really can't control. It says that the reality in which we were placed gives us two, and, only two choices: suicide or not suicide. If I don't eat anything at all, that's what? Suicide. If I feed on myself, elbow today… kneecap tomorrow…

that eventually ends up as what? Suicide. That enables us to… make the next claim. Everybody alive affirms by the very fact of being alive which of those two options they have made. Oppression is a foundational human behavior. Everybody alive has chosen not-suicide, which is another way of saying that they have chosen and setup as their principle of behavior, Oppression. Their survival and their well being at the expense of whatever it is they eat. We have chosen our survival needs to be the highest good and we adopt an "any means necessary" approach, i.e., murdering the chicken, (or) whatever broccoli we eat. Vegetarians don't get off on this. We have chosen to enhance our survival and well being at the expense of whatever it is we eat.

*(Dr. Jones made an effort to sum up at this point, but further public remarks were rendered ineffective by the necessity of closing a session that had run overtime).*

1. William R Jones, *Is God A White Racist?* Boston, Beacon Press, 1973, 1998, Epilogue. The actual line is "On with the Debate!"
2. James Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation,* Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1989, 70.
3. I give the development of this theory attention in *"Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion,"* Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 2003. My attempt to work through a response to theodicy in light of humanism and the theological commitments of black churches extends this essay in numerous ways. See "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s God, Humanist Sensibilities and Moral Evil" in *Theology Today,* Volume 65, Number 1 (April 2008) 57-66.
4. Jones, pp. 206-7
5. Patrick Chamoiseau, *"Texaco,"* New York, Vintage Books, 1998. For more on Chamoiseau and Welch, see David Schafer's letter in this issue.
6. Carter G Woodson, *"The MisEducation of the Negro,"* (originally published 1933), Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press, 1990.