

Pondering the Faith

ReImagining Truth

Traversing the feminist Christian backlash

By Delores S. Williams

DURING THE PAST few months, conservative segments of several denominations have targeted feminist and womanist Christians who attended "ReImagining 1993," an international conference for re-imagining our faith. Over two thousand women from all over the world gathered last November in Minneapolis. Speakers helped women explore feminine biblical images (such as Sophia), new images of Jesus, and the positive character of women's sexuality.

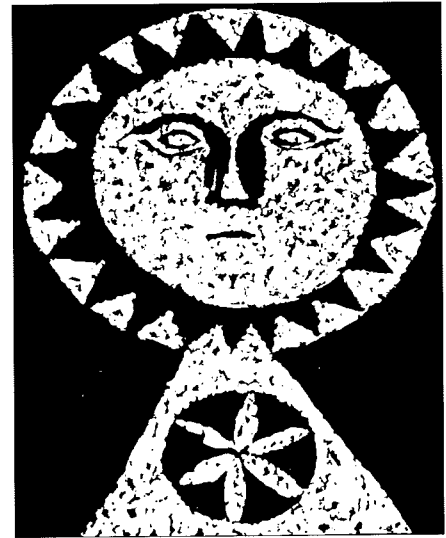
None of us in attendance at the conference anticipated the storm of vengeful criticism that the patriarchal, conservative elements of some Christian denominations would heap upon us. Conservative elements in the United Methodist church pounced on a women's group that contributed funds for the conference. Conservatives in the Presbyterian church pressured for the resignations of participants employed by the national church, particularly targeting one woman who is an authority in the national office. I was attacked because I used new images in portraying Jesus' atonement during my conference presentation. *The Presbyterian Layman* vehemently condemned the conference and the women who dared share their re-visioning.

THE OPPRESSIVE behavior of conservative forces in the church during the past few months has caused me to ponder the Christian faith.

Reflecting upon my heritage, which was passed on by Black preachers, parents, and grandparents who worked and prayed in the segregated South where conservative, White Christians lynched innocent Black Christians, I realized that Black Christians in the United States have always been forced to re-image the Christian religion.

Our re-imagining of Christianity is necessary in order to redeem it from the desecrated imagery of White Christians who snatched Black Africans from Africa in slave ships named Jesus, Mary, Liberty, John the Baptist, and Justice. Almost two million Blacks died in the middle passages of those ships due to the cruel, inhumane treatment they received from White, male Christians. As a result, we Blacks (who became Christians with historical memory) re-imagined Jesus, Mary, John the Baptist, justice, and liberty. From this centuries-long re-imagining of Jesus emerged a beautiful, redemptive, Black liberation theology.

When Black liberation theology was given voice in 1970 with the publishing of James H. Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, many people in the White, male, Christian community decried it as an illegitimate view of Jesus and theology. Today, those White, conservative, patriarchal forces are throwing identical accusations at all Christian women, regardless of the cultural context from which the women come. These conservative forces are telling women: your experiences with the feminine in the divine are illegitimate; God's work among you, expressed in feminine thought



and symbols, is illegitimate; your strong and steady feminist and womanist faith in a God who lives and moves among women, speaking to women in a feminine tongue that brings heart, head, and soul together—all are illegitimate and "illegal" if they differ from the male-created, patriarchal doctrines of the church.

I FIND MYSELF wondering where the White, conservative, Methodist and Presbyterian voices were when I was a little girl in the South watching the Ku Klux Klan burn Christian crosses, signaling that they had come to lynch one of us or that they would harm us unless we moved out of a White neighborhood.

Where were they when the cross was being re-imagined, not to symbolize redemption or salvation, but to signal hate, death, and destruction of Black people? Where were the conservative, White Christian voices when Hitler resurrected the bent cross, the swastika, and re-imagined it to signal the death of Jews? Where was this conservative voice when the United States turned back that shipload of Jews fleeing Hitler and the concentration camps in Nazi Germany where millions of Jews died?

I cannot help but wonder why the people complaining about feminist-womanist re-imagining ignore the White