

The Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas

[KBD Recording.m4a](#)

The Very Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas is Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Theology at Union. She was named the Bill and Judith Moyers Chair in Theology in November 2019. She also serves as the Canon Theologian at the Washington National Cathedral and Theologian in Residence at Trinity Church Wall Street. Dean Douglas' academic work has focused on womanist theology, Black theology, sexuality and the Black church, and racial and social justice. Prior to EDS at Union, she served as Professor of Religion at Goucher College where she held the Susan D. Morgan Professorship of Religion and is now Professor Emeritus. Before Goucher, she was Associate Professor of Theology at Howard University School of Divinity (1987-2001) and Assistant Professor of Religion at Edward Waters College (1986-1987).

Transcript

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Alright, we are recording. What is your full name?

Kelly Brown Douglas

I am [Kelly Brown Douglas](#).

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Awesome, do I have permission to record this interview?

Kelly Brown Douglas

Yes, you do.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Awesome. Where do you currently work and where have you worked over the course of your career?

Kelly Brown Douglas

Currently I am Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary, as well as the Bill and Judith Moyers Chair in theology. I am also the Canon theologian at the Washington National Cathedral. Prior to coming back to Union as Dean of the Divinity School, I taught at Goucher College for 17 years, where I held the Jessie Ball DuPont Chair, and I am now Professor Emeritus at Goucher College. Prior to Goucher, I taught at Howard University School of Divinity for 13 years and prior to that, I taught at Edward Waters College in Jacksonville, Florida for a year.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Wow, amazing. I know a bit about where you were trained, but if you could just tell us where you were trained, in which disciplines, and why?

Kelly Brown Douglas

I was trained at Union Theological Seminary, and I did my PhD work in systematic theology. My primary advisor was [James Cone](#). I did my MDiv at Union, as well. My undergraduate training was at Denison University where I was a psychology major, actually.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

So you are at Union, you are there in the 1990's, can you tell us a bit about your Graduate School experience there? You were there for the MDiv and for the PhD, so walk us through those experiences.

Kelly Brown Douglas

That is right. I came here in 1979/1980 for the MDiv, straight from Denison. I came here fundamentally, for one reason only, and that was to study [Black theology with James Cone](#). I had been introduced to Black theology while at Denison by the Dean of the Chapel then, who was a mentor and friend ([David Woodyard](#)). He and I continue to be in contact (that is another story, which perhaps we will get into). I actually first started out at Union as an MA but decided when I got here to switch over to the MDiv because I wanted to be ordained, which I am in the Episcopal Church.

I was introduced to James Cone while I was a senior at Denison. He encouraged me to come. So, it was the first class that I took when I was here, which was Systematic 103, amongst the other required courses. But I took that my first semester, and I could feel myself beginning to fall in love with theology, a field that I knew nothing about prior to coming. I just wanted to do Black theology. While I was here at Union, I was one of two, I think, Black women who were living on

campus at that time. Well, no [Katie Cannon](#) was here as well. But there were very few of us living here on campus. Katie was a PhD student though. In the MDiv program there was just [Linda Thomas](#) and I, who lived on campus at the time. There were other Black women in the MDiv as well as PhD program, although very few.

The program in terms of the Black community, there were a number of Black men who were going through the MDiv program to be ordained, or because they were already ordained in their various denominations. Most of them were members of independent Black churches. Be it, national or progressive Baptist, AME, or of various Pentecostal traditions. I say that to say I came here very committed to the Black community with a high degree, if you will, of Black consciousness. But not so much a high degree of consciousness regarding sexism and regarding who I was as a Black woman. It was the Black men when I got here who in essence radicalized me in that way. Not in a positive way, but because many of them — not all of them, but many of them — really reflected a side of the Black Church that was patriarchal and a very male dominated culture. At that time, during the early 1980's, that was very strong and very thick.

There had not been the emergence of a womanist theology. Black women were just beginning really to fill these pulpits. [Carolyn Knight](#) was here, and of course she worked with [Dr. Wyatt T. Walker](#). She was a very strong voice. So, there were women like Carolyn Knight, there were women like [Sandye Wilson](#) in the Episcopal Church, and [Sharon Williams](#), who was working at Abyssinian whom I met when I came here during a visit prior to becoming a student.

To see these strong Black women in pulpits, taking on these Black men — and these Black men were very bold in where they believed was the place for Black women. So, I recall very strongly Black men saying while I was here, that before Black women got placed and filled education positions in Black churches, all Black men should be placed first. And that Black men had first priority over the pulpits, etc. I was like, whoa. So, the experience of this profound sexism from the Black community, from Black men, for me was not just off putting but it shook the ground underneath my feet! Because I was so committed to the Black community, to Black women and Black men. And I did not quite know how to navigate that kind of sexism that was so profound as it was coming from Black men and Black Church men, particularly. And Black men committed to Black theology and committed to Black freedom and Black liberation. It was like, how could you be sexist like that? Not to speak of all the homophobia, and I will get to that.

So, while I was here with strong Black female voices like Katie, Linda, Caroline Knight, Sharon Williams, [Delores Williams](#), these voices became my core group of just trying to figure out how to understand and navigate this. [Jacquelyn Grant](#) was not on campus, she was moving towards the end of her PhD work, but she was here on and off.

[James Cone](#) would continue to push me because I, in some respects, had romanticized Black theology and he continued to push me to find my voice while I was here. He said, in that high voice of his, or that unique voice that was his, "Kelly, you know something is wrong with this! You have got to look at this as a Black woman! As a Black woman!" And he very much encouraged me to find my voice, as not simply a Black person but a Black woman. I remember that he bought Jacquelyn Grant into our class, Systematic 103 to speak and at that point to

discuss an article written by [Theresa Hoover](#) on “Black Women and the Churches: Triple Jeopardy.” Jacquelyn Grant was working on her dissertation that ended up being [White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus](#).

I remember sitting in that class when she was there, I was in my first year sitting in the front row and I asked her, “Where is your community, theologically. Do you identify as a Black or feminist theologian. Between feminist theology/theologians” — white women had very much developed a theology that spoke to sexism/patriarchy — and Black theology/theologians, were clear about racism, neither seemed to address both. So, I asked Jacquelyn with which theology did she identify? I do not quite remember Jacquelyn's answer at this point. But what I do remember is that her answer helped empower me to find my own path and my own way. So, those times at Union, particularly during my MDiv program, were at once, disconcerting in terms of the sexism that I encountered — I expected it in the wider community, but I did not expect it in the Black community, the sexism that I encountered from the Black men that were there at the time. Then in the wider Black Church. Again, that was disconcerting, but it was good in a sense that it forced me to claim not simply a Black identity, but an identity as a Black woman. So, at once disconcerting and empowering. Allowing me to find my voice.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you for sharing and laying the landscape of the Union at the moment in which you entered and were a student. I am curious to hear more about your project. The dissertation that emerged in that context and under the advising from Dr. Cone.

If you could just talk more about how you came to the project, what the project was, and how it laid the blueprint essentially for your research agenda.

Kelly Brown Douglas

It did lay the blueprint for my research agenda.

While I was here at Union as well, of course I was Episcopalian, and that was very unusual if not unique in the Black community that was Union. The only other Black Episcopal student ahead of me was Sandye Wilson at the time. So, I got a lot of flak, if you will, from the Black community. So, here is the second thing that I had to navigate: being Black and Episcopalian. I was continually told that “You are not a member of the Black Church. Y'all ain't Black” So, there I was in this sort of quandary in terms of my Black faith identity. Yet, I knew that I did not want to give up my Episcopal identity. Because I had long recognized how it, in so many ways, fit my spiritual personality. And it fit that personality to the degree that it was the worship experience that I was most comfortable with and that spoke to me spiritually. Even though I grew up in a Black Episcopal Church and worked in a Black Episcopal Church while I was here in New York (Church of the Intercession, about 30 blocks up from Union). I worked at that Church, was ordained through that Church. All through my MDiv and PhD time at Union. So, even though I

was always a member of Black congregations — actually, it really was not until high school that I recognized how white the Episcopal Church was — I was still in this quandary, because again, the Black community here at Union was consistently telling me that I was not Black enough, if you will, and that I was not a part of the Black Church.

I think that led me to really want to delve more deeply and profoundly into the Black faith tradition. While James Cone certainly was not a voice that was a part of those antagonistic voices regarding my being Episcopalian, he did make me aware of the fact that I was in a white denomination. And that I needed to navigate what that meant. So, that led me to my dissertation on the Black Christ. That was my avenue in trying to really understand more deeply, as I think I spoke about in what became my first book, and navigate more deeply, the faith of my grandmother who is almost the through line of all my work, amazingly enough. You do not know it until you get into that journey. But to really understand my grandmother's faith was what in many respects led me to work on the Black Christ — my maternal grandmother was not Episcopalian, neither of my grandparents were Episcopalian. My parents became that later. But my maternal grandmother had the most impact on me in terms of her faith. She was Baptist and when we visited, we would go to her Church. The people would get happy as she would say, and we would all jump as youngsters like whoa, what are they doing! She would say to her friends, “My mother's name was Mary. Mary done gone down there and made them kids some funny kind of religion.” Because we would be genuflecting and crossing ourselves. So, she would say, “What are y'all doing?” Which was funny to me at the time, because I thought our rituals were normal and that the rituals of her church, ‘shoutin and getting happy’ were strange. So, I wanted to get to the roots, if you will, of my grandmother's faith, of the Black faith tradition. That led me to my dissertation on the Black Christ. To explore more deeply the roots of that through the Black theological tradition. That is the beginning of the exploration. I look back at that book and go, “Oh... That which I did not know!” or had so much more to learn. But that for me was the beginning of my exploration of my Black faith tradition. And coming to understand that tradition that ran through *me* even as I was an Episcopalian.

So, that is what brought me to the study of the Black Christ.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is so fascinating. How the personal and the familial shape these broad intellectual questions that are so necessary. As you were talking, I could not help but think about the imprint of Cone as your teacher, in approaching questions about the Black faith tradition, as you put it. I am curious if you could lean into that a bit more.

How did Cone shape your field? What were his contributions from your perspective? What lessons ultimately did you glean from Cone and working with him so closely?

Kelly Brown Douglas

Oh my goodness. In any interview, to talk about the significance of the way he shaped the field of theology and really of Black theology is almost difficult to cover adequately. While Black theology has its roots in the enslaved tradition and informed by African tradition, etc. contemporary Black theology, that is, codifying, systematizing Black theology — that was James Cone. This will take us back to Denison a little bit, but I was first introduced to Black theology at Denison University as a junior, when I was having a sort of crisis of faith. As I grew more deeply into my Black self and recognizing more of the profound realities of white racism — did not call it white supremacy then, just knew it was white racism — I said, if Christianity does not have anything to say about this, about what it means to be Black in this country, and does not have anything to say to these white folks, then I am not leaving my Blackness behind, but I have had it with Christianity. I came up in a faith tradition like most of us, where we got images of a White Jesus hanging on the wall, you go into your grandparents' homes, and they have that little picture — our grandparents always had that little picture, Jesus, the shepherd, with the little cloth; the little blonde hair, blue eyed, gentle eyed Jesus. Alongside the picture of Martin Luther King, John Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy. They were the trifecta, and we had that little picture of Jesus. It seemed like in every Black home.

So, I said “No, to this white Jesus!” Even as I had grown up through the 1960’s and came to my Blackness, even there, I still was not quite wrestling with what it meant to be Black and Christian, until I got to Denison and in that junior year was in this existential faith crisis. I deeply loved the Church but was willing to leave it behind. That is when the Dean of Chapel gave me James Cone's book, [*A Black Theology of Liberation*](#). For whatever reason, I went home that weekend from college, and I remember in my bedroom, laying in the bed, I read that book twice over the weekend. Because the first time I read it, it was like, whoa, either something is wrong with this book, or something is wrong with the white man who gave it to me! Because this book was talking about “God is Black. Jesus is Black. Whiteness is of the Antichrist”. I am like, yes! Yes! Yes! I liked that part of it very strongly. Then, I went back, and I read it a second time and I said, this is Black faith and what I recognize! This is what James Cone did for, I think, the field of theology. There would not be any of us studying Black theology, but for James Cone. He said that the Black story is God’s story, and God’s story is the Black story. And if you do not know the Black story, then you cannot know God’s story. Woah! So that inspired me to want to know more about this story that was the Black story in God’s story! I was a psych major, and he is talking about liberation, and that if you are not talking about Black liberation then you are not talking about Jesus, you are not talking about Christianity. I wanted to, with the hubris of a 21/22-year-old, bring these principles from Black theology together with psychology, and create Black psychology (as if [Alvin Poussaint](#) hadn't already done that). That is the hubris of a 22-year-old.

But after James Cone, one could not do theology in the wider theological field the same way. For me, he was the Luther of a contemporary theological reflection. Because you had to begin to talk about the Black God and the Black Jesus, and what it really meant if you took seriously that, Jesus was crucified, you took seriously that God freed the Israelites, then you had to talk about Black people. So that was the beginning. James Cone gave me back my faith. But he also gave the wider Black community, and these young Black scholars, a way to study our faith, and to and

let us know that our faith tradition had something to offer to the wider Christian community and to the wider theological community. In actual fact, when I came to even do my PhD work, of course I stayed at Union with Dr. Cone, there was really no place for Black students to be able to go, study and get a PhD in the religious field, studying *their* tradition. Particularly at that time, you could get in, but you had to study at Barth or some European theologian. But to write a dissertation that had something to do with Blackness, well, at that time, the Academy said that's not scholarly. But James Cone said no, this is systematic theology. Black theology is systematic theology, and it has something to say to these others who have been doing theology ignoring the Black experience and Black faith. He was telling them; you are not doing theology — at least, you are not doing Christian theology. Then he would bring us on and let us study! I was able to dig deep into my own faith tradition because James Cone had created the paradigm and had opened the door. So, as far as I am concerned, he created a whole new field of study, and systematic theology.

Moreover, he laid the foundation for womanist theology. But for James Cone, in so many respects, there would be no path for the developing womanist theological thought. Even while [Katie Cannon](#) did not study with him, because she was in ethics, Katie Cannon as she would have told you, was highly impacted and influenced by him. She was able to do what she did because she was here with James Cone, and James Cone was here while she was moving through. He pushed Black women to claim our voices! And we have Jacquelyn Grant, me, Katie, who would do ethics at Union, and Delores who was here from Union (but would not study with him). All of us, I think, were here because James Cone was here. For those of us who went into systematic theology, who was Jacquelyn Grant and me at the time, James Cone took us on as his students. James Cone opened the door and told us, “Do not do what I am doing, you critique this, and you find your voice.” So, he gave way to even open the door for womanist theology to be born from my perspective.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is a really a wonderful segue into thinking about the inter-relatedness of Black theology and womanist theology. You hinted at it, but I am wondering if you could talk a bit more about how Cones's Black theology paved the way for womanist theology? In some way, maybe implicitly, it seems to me that Union in particular is a site for the founding of these two fields. So, I am curious to hear more about that kind of history, too.

Kelly Brown Douglas

I certainly think that just the nature of Union is this progressive, theological seminary. I mean, Union was the place where [Bonhoeffer](#) came through. It was the place where [Tillich](#) came through. Also, [Reinhold Niebuhr](#). All these people who were exiled from one place to the other right? So, it was fitting that James Cone would also come to Union. However, it should always be remembered that when James Cone came here, he had to fight the racism of this place, and

this place remains — I mean, it is a white institution. So, he had to fight that, and he of course has told that story, so I do not need to tell his story. But I say that to say, let's not romanticize Union. But, as a progressive theological institution it at least opened its doors to more progressive theological voices, even as it continued to reflect its own very embedded systemic and structural racism. And it did and it does. With that said, I think James Cone laid the foundation for womanist theology in two ways. There is always the push and pull, right?

The push was this: James Cone's theology was very male centric. James Cone's early theology was very sexist. It reflected the Black power movement and the civil rights struggle of the day, out of which it was born. It reflected through the traditions of Martin and Malcolm, out of which it was born. This meant that as during the 1960's, Black freedom was equated with Black men finding and claiming their manhood, Black theology was the same. When they talked about Black liberation — even [James Baldwin](#), [Audre Lorde](#) has to push back on James Baldwin. I love James Baldwin, and I am so disappointed by some of those conversations he had, this protection of Black masculinity and Black manhood. So, Black women who were really, in so many ways like they are in the Church, so instrumental in the hub of that movement yet were never brought to the forefront. That is the history that you know, and I do not have to rehearse. But James Cone's theology reflected that. His [Black Theology & Black Power](#), [A Black Theology of Liberation](#) and his [God of the Oppressed](#). I think, in this conversation with the wider Academy and really trying to systematize Black theology. But, not simply in his masculine and male pronouns but the way in which he speaks of liberation and freedom. He does not engage Black women's realities at all. And he said, "something is missing" and that was the missing link. And he has told it, how women, and particularly through the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians began to really push him. As I began to develop my consciousness as a Black woman, I recognized how very masculinist, male centric and sexist his theology was, and how it left out the experiences of Black women. Even as he talks a lot about his mother and her faith, he left out the experiences of Black women in his theology. So that is the push.

The pull that he also allowed for was his insistence that we find our voice. I remember I wrote my dissertation for him three or four times. He would go, "No, no." And I am like, Oh my God. I mean it took forever. Like, am I ever going to finish this? I remember talking to Jacquelyn Grant, I was so distressed and ready to throw in the towel! "Oh my goodness is he ever going to pass this? Is this ever going to be good enough?" He did not like mediocrity, and he did not 'suffer' fools lightly. Katie Cannon used to say, "he likes super Black people" (she would use a different word). And we would laugh. But one of the reasons that he continued to say "no, no" to my dissertation is because he wanted me to find my voice. He did not want it to be a recitation of — just his or other's thought. Rather, he wanted me to find my constructive voice. And my voice as a Black woman.

I remember that as I was working through that I came across [Alice Walker's In Search of Our Mothers' Garden](#). I remember sitting in my apartment here on the campus and it was on my shelf — you know how you get these books and say I am going to read them when I have time. I was working on my dissertation, looked up at that book and probably out of a sense of procrastination I pulled it down and read it. I saw the womanist definition I was like, whoa. I did not know what

other Black women were doing with it, but it spoke to me. I think it is in [The Black Christ](#) at the end, I start talking about Womanists. I remember that if I had not in that book, it was all at that same time. I remember Jacquelyn Grant and I were both in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians because of James Cone. He brought us into the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. We were at a conference in Mexico. I asked Jacquelyn then, "I am thinking about using the term 'womanist,' what do you think about that?" Jacquelyn said that is what she was using! It was like magic. Then [Cheryl Townsend Gilkes](#) said it began to pop up all over like popcorn! So, it emerged. We were not, like, in this little meeting and said, "let's use womanist." We all just started using it! It was amazing. But again, for me that sprung from James Cone, his Black theology being so sexist, and while he was rejecting my dissertation because I had yet to find my voice.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

It is such an amazing story, and it sounds to me like it is about an intervention at the level of intervening in scholarly discourse. But in the way you have narrated it, it sounds to me that one might say it is spirit led in some way. Just thinking about the way in which it popped up everywhere, spreading, if you will. That is so fascinating.

I am curious, in your language and in your voice, you name that Cone encouraged all of you to find your voice. I think there is such an important message there. I am curious for you, if you could speak to Cone today, what would you say to him? I know that is a heavy question considering his passing. But I think it is an important one in thinking about how his work still speaks and reverberates today. So, for you now being back at Union, if you could speak to him, what would you say?

Kelly Brown Douglas

That is a heavy question because he and I remained very close. After Union and up until the time of his death as you probably know. He had asked me to organize his funeral. So, I was fortunate to do so, which I think just the universe opened, fortunate to come back and be here that year and spend that year with him before his passing and spend that last week with him. So, there is so much I would say to him. But the first words are just thank you, and I said that to him. Thank you for not only opening the door for me but opening the door for so many others. And I said it at his funeral. So, I think what I say would be what I indeed said. at his funeral. He created a pathway for us to continue to explore and find our voice.

He did something else, too. I still live by this, and it is one of the things I think that he tried to instill. That, one theology is not abstract, and you talked about how the personal and all of that interact. Well for me, that is what theology is. It always emerges, and you can see that through line in my work as well, it really does emerge as we try to navigate our faith through our life experiences. For me and for Cone, we always have to be accountable to those people who, I like to say, are on the underside of injustice. Those Black people who are trapped in crucifying

realities. We have to be accountable to them. So, when I think of Cone, I always think of that sense of accountability, not to the Academy, but to your community as they struggle for freedom. So, one of the things I would say to Cone is I am still trying! I am trying to pay my rent for living on this earth. I would hope Cone is one of the people in my life who I want to always make proud. So, I carry that. I do not want to betray the legacy that was his. To me, that was a legacy about accountability, a legacy about commitment, and a legacy about paving the way for the next generation to carry forward, beyond whatever one was able to see. The legacy was not carrying forward his theology, his paradigm — I think his paradigm needed to be opened up. However, but for his paradigm we would not be doing this.

So, just carrying forward his legacy of commitment. Thank you, and I am trying. I hope you are proud.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you for that reflection.

This will be our last question, but I think in the spirit of carrying in the torch, your work has focused on Blackness, gender, sexuality, justice through the lens of Christian theology. Where would you like to see the field go? In light of your work, the work of others and the work of a new generation of scholars, practitioners, where would you like to see things go?

Kelly Brown Douglas

Good question. Let me just say one thing, you mentioned sexuality. That is another area that James Cone did not talk about. These matters of sexuality became very significant to me and remain so in my work. I would like to see Black theology grow in the sense of finding ways to not simply express the faith that is that of Black people, but to give back to the community and help it move forward in its struggle for freedom. That means continuing to complicate the realities of what justice looks like. Because we continue to understand more and more the richness that is the multitude of experiences in the Black community, always keeping those that are on the raw edges of just struggling to survive — let alone thrive in the Black community at the center of our work.

Right now, I think of particularly, the Black trans youth who have been put out of their homes. Who are homeless. That means to me the Black theology, if it really is going to do its job; it must move the Black Church into really being Black! I always say that, and I mean that. The Black Church, inasmuch as it is not a vehicle, that affirms, moves forward and allows all to thrive, and is on the side of all Black people then it has betrayed its blackness. Meaning — because you know the Black church is not simply misogynistic, it is LGBTQ terroristic. And Black theology must open that Black church up, because otherwise it is betraying its blackness and it is betraying Christianity. So, I often say to my Episcopal Church tradition — and I mean it for a Black faith, Black churches as well, to call ourselves Church, is aspirational. Our task is to grow

into what it means to be Church. To call ourselves *Black* Church, not simply is that aspirational, but it also calls us to a certain accountability. Black theology needs to do that! So, I would like to see more and more voices doing a black theology to push our Church to be truly black so that all Black people can experience what it means to be free. Free from all of those sins that hold even the Black church back from being truly Black, and from being truly Church. Because the Black Church *has* been in the vanguard of the Black struggle for freedom — *has* been, not so much anymore when it comes to LGBTQ persons. So, in this regard it has betrayed what it means to be Church and what it means to be Black. That is the task! The theological task of those of us who do theology from out of the Black faith tradition, to hold our Church accountable. Until we do that, the Church won't be free and Black folk won't be free.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Wow. Thank you so much Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas.

Kelly Brown Douglas

Thank you, Dr. Greene-Hayes, for this project!

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you, thank you.

Kelly Brown Douglas

Good conversation.