

The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes  
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*Cheryl Townsend Gilkes is the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Professor of African-American Studies and Sociology and director of the African American Studies Program at Colby College (Waterville, Maine). An ordained Baptist minister, she is an assistant pastor for special projects at the Union Baptist Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She holds degrees in sociology from Northeastern University (B.A., M.A., Ph.D.) and has pursued graduate theological studies at Boston University's School of Theology. She is the recipient of an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. She is a sociologist whose specialties focus on African American women, religion, social change, and the legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois for sociology, African American studies, and religious studies. Her research, teaching, and writing have specifically focused on the role of African American women in generating social change and on the diverse roles of Black Christian women in the twentieth century.*

## Transcript

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Did you watch [Dr. Butts' funeral](#)?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

I did not watch the whole thing. I saw different parts of it on YouTube.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

I always think of funerals as also ethnographic events.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Yes, sure.

Dr., can you begin by telling us your full name?

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Cheryl Louise Townsend Gilkes, no hyphen.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you and do I have permission to record this interview?

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Yes, you have permission to record.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Okay, all right. Where do you currently work — well, now you are retired.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Well, now I am evolving like Serena Williams. Today is the 7<sup>th</sup> [of November 2022], so I am 68 days into being the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Professor emerita of African American Studies and Sociology. I will be a distinguished faculty member, visiting faculty member at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, where I will be teaching. If you go [on Facebook](#), you can see [the course](#) that I am going to be teaching there, and if you click on the icon, you can read the course description. I am also a consultant to and advisor to the president at Colby until the end of this academic year. So, I am sort of retired, which means I have time to schedule things like today and not worry about missing class.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is wonderful. Retired, but on the move and sharing a wealth of wisdom in those different roles. I also know that you have work outside of the Academy that you are doing. Can you share a bit more about that?

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Well, I am a Baptist minister and the assistant pastor for special projects at the Union Baptist Church in Cambridge, which is my home church. It is where I grew up. It is where I answered my call to ministry, and I have served there as Associate Minister, Assistant Pastor, and now Assistant Pastor for special projects. For basically, 40 years. There is a convergence between — I am a [Sam Proctor](#) model of academic and ministry. And he was, and is, a role model for me. I had Dr. Proctor all to myself for two whole days, up at Colby.

I invited him to speak, and I drove him around, so I had him all to myself. But he was one of my role models. That tradition of being both, academic and clergy has defined a significant portion of the Black Church. So much so that when I had my ordination in 1986, a man by the name of [Thomas Hoyt](#), both a New Testament biblical scholar, and eventually the presiding Bishop for the CME Church, did the charge to the scholar, as part of my ordination service. Ordinarily they

do the charge to the candidate and the charge to the church, but we added the charge to the scholar. So, I have seen those two roles — academic and clergywoman — as very much intertwined. I have been a visiting faculty member at several seminaries, particularly Iliff School of Theology. I did some work with [Vincent Harding](#) and [James Lawson](#); Chicago Theological Seminary, where I did work with [Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite](#); Harvard Divinity School where, in 1981/1982, I was a visiting lecturer and research associate in the Women studies and Religion Program, and in 1992/1993 academic year, I was also a visiting faculty member at the Divinity school, while I was a visiting scholar at Episcopal Divinity School and a Du Bois fellow. So, I have always seen these roles as intercalated.

The passing of Reverend Dr. Butts brought to memory a lot of work that I did with, for instance, Colgate Rochester Theological School, as a consultant and in terms of helping to establish the Black Church studies program there, or to crystallize it to better define it and its aims. I worked with the Fund for Theological Education when, [James Cone](#) and I met and he was a major factor in the direction of my career. I worked with him. We were on the Fund for Theological Education together, interviewing doctoral students and making decisions about who would get money. The other thing that he needed as he was at the foundation of developing Black theology as a field, was a woman with a PhD to review and work with some of his students as an outside reader. At the very beginning of all of this, I was able to do that.

There has been a lot of change in seminary education and higher education and the ministry, and the expansion that took place — that explosion that took place. The blessing, the providence, I had a PhD at the moment that they needed somebody with a PhD who was interested in this material. My three earliest academic publications came out in 1980 — one about race and ethnicity, another about African American women and social change, and the other about the Black Church, and those have been the parallel tracks of my academic life. It was that article, “[The Black Church as a Therapeutic Community](#),” that, thanks to James Cone, ended up in the [Journal for the Interdenominational Theological Center](#) and began our friendship and collegueship over all those years. That was that was quite some time as well. Therefore, again I have never seen them as separate. When I went to Colby in 1987, I told them “You are calling somebody here who is also a Baptist minister and goes to a lot of conferences. I need my weekends. So, I need a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday teaching schedule, ”and they adhered to that. They acceded to that.

So that is what I have been doing.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

You have been doing quite a lot!

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

[My full CV](#) will help you make sense of stuff.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

I am sure the CV could help answer this question, but I am curious to hear, you have talked a lot about what it means for you to be both scholar and to be practitioner/preacher. Those entities as being intimately intertwined.

As you work and give your life and expertise in all these different spaces. I am curious to step back a moment to think about where you were trained. In which disciplines and how did that shape your approach to your work?

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

As a sociologist, I was at Northeastern University, BA, MA, PhD. People ask, why did you stay there? I respond that they kept giving me money. So, I became a sociologist. My advisor was a woman by the name of [Blanche Geer](#), who is part of a group of people who developed an area of sociology, methodologically, called symbolic interaction. Blanche Geer was a co-author on a significant foundational book titled, [Boys in White: Student Culture in a Medical School](#).

So, I am part of the ethnographic wing of the discipline. That was my training. Because of one of the consequences of affirmative action which nobody ever talks about, that changed academia greatly, I was in a brand-new PhD program at a working-class school where, in the old days, I never would have had access to some of the jobs that I had. The Chair of that department knew some of the limitations we were facing, and really trained us to be teaching faculty. The Chair basically made it a requirement that we teach in the night school at Northeastern University. So, when we graduated, we would leave with a huge repertoire of courses that we had taught at least once and sometimes several times. So, I have been teaching courses on race and ethnicity since the fall of 1973. Before I even finished my PhD, in 1979. So, that that tells you about one piece. Starting in 1978, I was at Boston University because affirmative action rules required that academic departments advertise. People do not realize how revolutionary the requirement to advertise was in academia. During a faculty meeting at Boston University, we were doing committee assignments. Everybody was shocked when one of the faculty members, a famous pale male, volunteered for the affirmative action committee. All the women sort of stared at him and he said, "Do not look at me like that, I am in favor of affirmative action! If it was not for affirmative action, Cheryl would not be here!" Knowing him like I did, I knew there was more coming, because they were getting ready to go, "Oh my God, how could he say that?" And, I am thinking, "Keep on talking!" I will never forget this, and I have told this story several times. He said, "Don't you remember how we did it in the old days? When we wanted a new faculty member, the Chair went into his office, picked up the phone, called his best friend, and said send over your best man." He said if it was not for affirmative action and the fact that we had to advertise, we never would have met the range of people that we have been privileged to meet.

He went on and on! It is one of the reasons that when you talk about hiring, you have some institutions that are passionately in favor of affirmative action. Because it opened the door. Many white males do not realize that they never would have had the opportunity that they had, if it had not been for this requirement, attached to affirmative action, that institutions must advertise. That is how I ended up at BU. Because, normally, the Chair at Northeastern would have called the Chair at BU, and the Chair at BU would have called the Chair at Harvard. That is how they got faculty members. So, I answered this ad and ended up there.

When I answered my call to the ministry, I recognized that I needed to go to seminary. The nice thing about being at Boston University was they had an employee benefit that one was allowed six free graduate credits per semester. Or they could send their kids. So, all I had to do was pay for two credits when enrolling in two four-credit courses. So, I was a tenure track faculty member going to seminary at the same time. Which was quite an adventure. But the nice thing is that when training ministers, seminaries do not teach on Monday's, because everybody is recovering from preaching and work on Sundays. So, I would run over to the seminary in the School of Theology and see what their tentative mockup was for course scheduling. Then, I would run back to my department and schedule my courses in such a way that I could take the courses over at School of Theology.

It was crazy. But, only in one course of mine did that not work. It was the course on preaching. The professor changed the schedule during the first-class meeting. You could meet the preaching requirement in several ways: You can invite faculty to come see you preach at your setting; you could preach in the Chapel; or you could take the preaching course. One of the things that happened was, I got invited because I was a professor, to preach at a special event in the Chapel. So that is how I passed my preaching requirement. But the other part of it was, the first course that I signed up for, the professor was sick, and I arrived at class and there was a note on the table that said, "tell Professor Gilkes to teach my class today."

So, this was one of the problems of being a seminarian while at the same time sitting on doctoral committees, for students coming out of the School of Theology. The other thing that made things a little easier is that we had a college president who got up in a faculty meeting and said one day, "Look, I am going to start having the registrar arbitrarily assign the 8:00 in the morning teaching slot if people do not volunteer to teach in it. Because I am tired of raising money to build buildings for faculty, who do not want to teach on Fridays." So, I went to the department administrator and said I will teach in the 8:00 o'clock slot, also because seminary courses are not scheduled at 8:00am. So, I taught on Mondays at 8:00 o'clock in the morning. I also had full classes because Boston University had a lot of commuter students who were on campus by 7:00 o'clock in the morning. In fact, the department was so shocked, they loved me for doing that, because nobody wanted to teach at 8:00 o'clock in the morning. One of the faculty members got her camera, came down, and took pictures of the class because they could not believe that there was a full classroom at 8:00 o'clock in the morning.

Now, I do not hold an MDiv, but I took all the courses I needed, as far as my committees were concerned in terms of ordination. I took many biblical courses, that was really what I wanted to

do. Had I not been a faculty member, had I gone to seminary full time and done nothing else, then I would have done biblical and learned the Hebrew and Greek. But, learning a language while also a tenure track faculty member is just not an option. They would not even wave the sociology requirement. Can you believe these people? And I am sitting on their doctoral committees!

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is so fascinating.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

So, like I said, I do not hold the MDiv, but I got enough courses that I needed.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Yeah, that is great. You made it work for you.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Then Colby came calling, basically recruited me, and I resigned from Boston University, literally in the middle of a tenure review! I had already gone up for tenure and my department fully supported me. The vote was 24 to 1 and we had a British Chair who did not believe in unanimous votes, because at the time there was a lot of political difficulty at the college under a president named [John Silber](#) (Google him when you have a moment, and you will see what was going on).

My Chair came up to me once, with my CV in his hand, and said in his Liverpool accent, "Cheryl, I cannot call it. I have seen people who have done far more than you have, not get tenure. But I have also seen people get tenure who have not done anything near what you have done. So, let's look at your CV and take some of these things off, these things that say feminist." I said, "hold it Jeff [Coulter], let me help you out here. If people are going to have problems with anything on my CV that says 'feminist', they are going to have even more problems with 'Black and African American.'" He goes, "you think so?" I mean, he was not from the United States, he was a theorist, he did not know. He was totally clueless. I said, "what you see is what you get. We will go with what I have done." And I jokingly tell people I used to walk around the department singing that old rhythm and Blues song, "*Honey, if you lose me. Yeah, Oh yeah. You lose a good thing.*"

So that 24 to 1 vote was a really affirming vote to my work and its quality. I later found out, when I went to Colby, I basically said to them, “does the dossier look tenurable?” They said yes and by 1989 I was tenured.

Does that help answer that question?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Absolutely. It really speaks to a unique journey.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

It is called providence; you have got to believe in God. The people that I have met, [Delores Williams](#), who opened doors and pushed me and ushered me through. James Cone and [Delores Williams](#) at Union really made a difference in my life. [Renita Weems](#) and [Prathia Hall](#) made a difference. You just could not make this stuff up, how I got to this point in life.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

When you were in this process of becoming, in many ways, who were your mentors, advisors, and teachers? You have mentioned Cone and Williams. I am curious to hear more about those connections and any others.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Well, let me back up. When I started Graduate School, my dad said to me, “I do not know much about this sociology thing. But they must have a national organization. I will buy you a plane ticket if you go to the meeting.” So, I started going to the American Sociological Association meetings when I was a first-year grad student. Remember, my department was a new program. So, they decided that they were going to take the graduate students as part of our professional socialization. They encouraged us to go to the Eastern Sociological Society meetings that first year. So, I went to New York. Now, this is academic year 1970/1971, the Eastern Sociological Society was fascinating because what schools are in the Eastern region? And who are the faculty? I remember, here are your footnotes walking around! Real life people who are the stuff of your footnotes or who are required reading in your theory course! Nowadays it would be called stalking, but I can remember following [Robert Merton](#) and [E. Digby Baltzell](#) down a hallway in a hotel (we were on the ballroom floor, in the meeting room floors, I was not in the residence hall, so I was not that crazy). But I am following these two men as they are walking, talking to each other, commenting on the fact that Du Bois had done the first community study in the United States! I had been talking about Du Bois in my theory class. Growing up I knew who

Du Bois was because my father, bless his heart, when I was a little kid, used to stand over me and go, “Daughter. What's the word?” And I would look up at my tall, big dad and go “Du Bois, Daddy! Du Bois, D-U-B-O-I-S. Du Bois!” So, I knew who Du Bois was. But I had to do it on my own. Then for several reasons, I started using some of his material in the work that I was doing. But anyways, they had a caucus meeting of the Black sociologists in the Eastern region, and they were looking for two volunteers to represent the Eastern region at the Caucus of Black Sociologists in Denver.

I knew I was going because Daddy was going to buy me this plane ticket, so I volunteered to be one of the representatives. I got to meet and work with people like, [James Blackwell](#), [Charles Vert Willie](#), [Joyce Ladner](#), I could just run the list! But the thing was that once a year I got together with all these famous and not-so-famous Black sociologists who were there trying to reshape the discipline. I also met other Black graduate students at other places. So, I had that extra boost in addition to the folks that I was working with at Northeastern University.

In addition to Blanche Geer, one of my most influential teachers was a woman by the name of [Mary Catherine Bateson](#). Her mother and father are both famous anthropologists, [Margaret Mead](#) and [Gregory Bateson](#). Gregory Bateson was a big influence on another major person whose work I depended on by the name of [Ronald \(R.D.\) Laing](#), a psychiatrist. My first car was named after R. D. Laing, that is how influential he was.

Those connections, especially Bateson and Laing, who I actually met (long story, you don't have that much time). The impact was on what eventually became my article, “The Black Church as a Therapeutic Community” which as I said, 1980 published in the *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*. That was not the first place to which I had submitted it. I had submitted it to the journal, *Social Problems*, at the advice of my committee. They had gone over this paper; the paper was an accident! I had not planned to specialize on the Black Church, and my research that I started on the Sanctified Church was more to look at social change and issues of migration and the formation of new organizations. I was not even thinking theologically or socio-theologically about anything! I was a good old fashioned secular sociologist like the rest of them.

I also got to meet [Bill Wilson](#) who was also an influence. I sent it off to *Social Problems* and the reviewers threw it on the floor and jumped up and down on it! They were so enthusiastic in their rejection. One of them even went and xeroxed Marx, because it was clear that I did not understand what Marx meant when he wrote that “religion was the opiate of the people.” They put all of that in the envelope and the editor sent it back saying, Reject do not resubmit, do not even think about it! (I mean, that is not how they worded the letter, but that was basically the whole thing). When I showed the response to my committee members, one of them, [Carol Owen](#) mentions [Arlene Kaplan Daniels](#), the editor, who I also knew because all this upheaval was going on in the discipline. There was a new organization called Sociologists for Women in Society, I belonged to that too! I belonged to Caucus of Black Sociologists, American Sociological Association, the Society for the Study of Social Problems, briefly to the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. You will see, I was just an organization woman all the way! All these

different things. So, we knew Arlene because she would come and visit, and she would give colloquia then talk to the graduate students.

Our Chair, a man by the name of [Norman Kaplan](#), was doing everything to provide the intellectual capital that we would need in this new program with all these students who did not have any kind of academic background in their families. We are going to be first generation academics. So, Carol looks at the response and says, "Arlene must have sent this to hostile reviewers." That was the first time I got any insight into how, in the publication process, it was possible to use a so-called blind review process to get rid of stuff you did not want to publish. So, I gathered up all the reviewers' comments, I took my little manuscript, and sent it to [Dr. Charles Vert Willie](#). Remember all these Black sociologists that I got to meet, party, and eat with? Not only did Dr. Willie operate at the national level, but he and his wife would give a reception, every year at the Eastern Sociological Society meetings. So, we got to spend time with him. I called him and asked if he would read it and give me some advice. He said that he would be happy to do that. So, I sent him the manuscript and the reviewers' comments. And he said, there is something wrong here. That, their comments do not have anything to do with what was written. It was like, why did this get rejected?

In the meantime, I got the job at Boston University and James Cone came to BU to speak. I went to hear him in the Chapel, and I was in awe. The reason why I went is because I made it a point to reach out to the faculty member who taught sociology of religion and who taught about the Black Church, [John Cartwright](#). Note, it was John Cartwright's class where I had to substitute for when he was sick. So, when he told me Cone was coming, I went to the event at the Chapel to shake his hand. I was in awe and said, "Dr. Cone, I have this paper. Would you be willing to read it?" He said "yes!" and you know how James Cones speaks. He said, "send me the paper." So, I did. He wrote back and said, "Send this to the *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*." I sent it and received four blind reviews that came back, "Publish, No revisions!" Boom, it went straight into the journal. So, that is how James, and I became friends. Obviously, things were happening fairly fast because I was at Harvard, in their in their Women Studies in Religion program. Then, I was [a Bunting Fellow](#) for two years. In the meantime, I met [Katie Cannon](#) and Delores Williams, who came to Boston University to teach while her husband was on the faculty at Episcopal Divinity School. And, [Riggins Earl](#). I mean, you see how all these connections start piling up. Delores was the one who got me involved in the American Academy of Religion. So, I tell people that James Cone basically got me on the river and Delores Williams hopped in the boat and started helping me steer.

So, my advising was greatly diffuse, diverse and partly a consequence of my liking to go to meetings, to learn, and hear people talk and participate. At one point I served as the Vice President for the Society for the Study of Social Problems, even though they never published any of my articles. I served on the National Board of the American Sociological Association. Things like that. But the thing was, I started early in graduate school, participating in these meetings and when I submitted stuff, I just would not tell people that I was a graduate student.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Yeah, strategic.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

James Blackwell, when he was president of the Eastern Sociological Society and the Society for the Study of Social Problems had me come be an assistant program coordinator. Because when you are president, you need to appoint a program coordinator who puts together your program. This means that you get a lot of connections. Then, when I joined SSSR, another woman who was very influential, sister [Marie Augusta Neal](#), and this was another case where sociology of race and ethnicity connected with sociology of religion. When I use the term socio-theology or socio-theological, I am drawing on her work. When she became president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in 1982, I was her program coordinator. So, I got tossed in the deep end of the pool and met everybody in the field at once. Her theme was religion and justice. So, I said to her, "let's make sure that we invite the people who wrote the book on justice, meaning the Hebrew Bible." Because the association had been very narrowly Christian. The dominant Christians in the group maintained a certain anti-Catholicism because the religion scholars who were Catholic were also heavily sisters and women religious. So, you scratch a Protestant long enough, you will find a strain of anti-Catholicism up in there. I got to listen to these guys, because for a long time they thought I was a sister. Then when they found out I was Baptist, their veils came down and I got to hear some of the stuff. I knew they had discriminated against her, but they did not have any better sense than to assume that I thought like they did, so they said stuff in front of me that I said, okay, this is what happened. This is who so and so is.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Wow. That is fascinating.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

So, I had to spend time in warrior mode as well. When you talk about who your advisors and mentors were, there was mentorship on the run. It was a little bit here, a little bit there and learning how academia actually worked. Somebody like Charles Willie who was willing to read and helped me understand that I was not crazy. His daughter, by the way, is going to be the incoming president at Smith College.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Oh, that is amazing.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

So, it is sort of like the valley of dry bones. You start talking about all the different connections.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

For you as a Black sociologist by training and this one who came to accept your call to ministry, how did you get to the Black study of religion? I am curious if you could tell me a bit more about that.

So, who was your dissertation about?

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

My dissertation was not about religion. It was about African American women and social change. In fact, I had to go back to my data and look at some of the religion stuff because I was a serious secular sociologist. I was like the other sociologists. But a couple of things happened. I told you that article "The Black Church as a Therapeutic Community" was a providential event which I do not want to call an accident. I had been teaching all those courses required, as a graduate student. And Northeastern University was on the quarter system, so the depth of my training in teaching race and ethnicity happened because I had to teach about race and ethnicity for 36 weeks instead of just a quick semester and that's it. But this meant really developing, being able to explore stuff in depth. I had older students who were asking great questions. So, that was one of the things that happened. But I taught a couple of other courses. One was the sociology of mental health. We were also a sociology and anthropology department and the grant, the fellowship that was supporting me was one that pulled the anthropology department and the anthropology wing of the sociology department together on this grant.

So, the kind of work I was doing was sitting and watching. I tell people, the ethnographer in me never turns off. Even at a funeral, if I am in a Masonic funeral, I will do things like count how many people marched down the aisle for the memorial service. When we laid to rest one of our Grand Masters, he had 301 men come down the aisle. That did not count the folks who were late for the processional and came up through the sides and in the back. So, I do stuff like that. One thing that happened was, I did this work on African American women and social change, which my advisor did not want me to do. I found out later that she was doing everything possible to discourage me, but I just kept persisting. We did this, her version, my version, for the other graduate students coming through because I was like the second PhD out of that program. She had been hired because she was famous for producing PhDs. There was a whole other bunch of stuff. So, she was telling the story and said to them "every week I would try to discourage her and raise some objection and the next week she would come back and answer that rejection." Finally, she decided to let me go out into the field and that when I failed, she would come back

and do what she wanted me to do. And lo and behold, she came back with the data. I had to order her out of the field! She finally said, “You could stop interviewing! You have enough.” I was studying women, African American women and social change, and I was looking at community leaders and the criterion for being in my study was that people in the community had to identify them as people who had “worked hard for a long time, for change in the Black community.”

I developed a list. I also scrolled through the community newspapers, because they had to be mentioned in the newspapers before a certain date, so that they weren't just a flash in the pan. And I connected these oral histories (now you know why I reminded you to record at the start). So, I collected all this data. I had a 400 and some odd page dissertation. Which, by the way, I have never published. Now I have about eight or nine articles, chapters, and edited volumes out of it. So, I did get some work done. But I am actually going back to turn it into a monograph. When it got sent off to review for publication, the publisher came back and said, “Our reviewers say it will make a nice paper.” I am like, “yeah... how many papers have I gotten from it already?” But I was busy.

So, I defended the dissertation. August 31st, 1979, at 7:00 o'clock in the morning. Why that time? Because the American Sociological Association was meeting in Boston and that way, they did not have to pay the plane fare for my outside reader. I also gave a paper at the ASA, later that day. That was how crazy it was! And remember, I have already been at BU for a year. So, my dad, bless his heart, showed up for my dissertation defense at 7:00 o'clock in the morning. One of my readers was a man by the name of [Roy Simon Bryce-LaPorte](#). There was such a crowd in the room that the committee had to leave the room to meet, and then come back. They could not send us out of the room, because there were too many of us! The room was full at 7:00 o'clock in the morning. Can you believe that? All my buddies showed up and other faculty showed up. And I think a few people from ASA who, because people knew that I was getting ready to defend, folks were making remarks at the ASA meetings, to my committee members that “we got our eyes on you. Don't you hurt her!” That that was how well known I was at this point. And I was a graduate student. Well, I also had a full-time tenure track job, but I still need to finish the dissertation. So, Roy turns to my dad, and he said “Mr. Townsend, it is not easy — Roy also happens to be Black — to get a daughter through school. Do you have some remarks you would like to make?” And my father, who was a Morehouse graduate, said “Yes. I like this work.” Now, understand that my father had read the entire first draft of my dissertation. When I called him and told him back in 1978 that I was not going to finish that year because I needed to make all these revisions, my father said, “I am so glad that Lady is not going to let you graduate with this, in the condition that it is in. These chapters are too big” and he went on. Everything that she had said, he said, and that kept me from going crazy. My dad liked my advisor because they were both World War II veterans who had gone to school on the GI Bill. How many people have a woman advisor, who is a World War II veteran, that got her doctorate on the GI Bill? Not very many, but I had one. She and my father loved each other because they were both World War II veterans. My dad said, “I would like to see somebody use this method to study the sanctified church.” And I was not thinking about it. But then I started thinking about it, which is a much longer story, to go into why I was thinking about it. But remember, I had this oddball paper, “The Black Church as a

Therapeutic Community” that had gotten written because I was invited to be part of a bicentennial session at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, with which I was not affiliated at that time.

It was 1976 when I wrote the first draft of this paper. Because I had gone to this event with R.D. Laing, the psychiatrist, where he was speaking, and people were talking about all these different radical therapies, and I am sitting there in Arlington Street Church. I was with my friend Gordon (who was friends with the woman who was friends with Laing, which was how I got to meet Laing afterwards). We went back to his hotel, which at the time was the Statler Hilton. He had a bottle of J&B Scotch in his briefcase and had just written a book of poetry aimed at themes and thesis on psychiatry. But one of the poems was written to the theme of Saint James Infirmary. And after he got a little bit of Scotch and him, he turns to me and says “Sing it for me! Please sing it for me! Make sure that I have got the got the meter right!” So, I am in this hotel room with all these people singing to the tune of “I Went Down to Saint James Infirmary.” I still have the book in a box in the garage, I know exactly where it is anyway. But I am sitting there in Arlington Street Church where these people are getting up to talk about these radical therapies; Primal Scream, Rajneesh meditation therapy, and I turn to Gordon to say, “Black folks have been doing that in their churches for 200 years!” So, when I got the call, and it was a weird moment and I immediately said, “Yeah, I will do a paper on ‘The Black Church as a Therapeutic Community.’” And that paper just poured out of me. I called them to say I had my paper done and they said, “Oh sorry, we cancelled the session.” So that is how that paper got started. But I was not in the Church at the time. I was not thinking about being in the Church. I had left the Church in 1965 in my freshman year of college, and I was not coming back. I went shopping, I did Yoga, you know I was doing everything, you name it, I explored it. I think I explored everything except Scientology. After writing the paper, I had this spiritual experience. I decided that I must be having auditory hallucinations, so I went into therapy. When I had the same event later on in 1980, on a Sunday morning. By that time, I was an assistant Church clerk, I had gone back to Church and started this work. I am sitting in Church and, the thing was, I was not going to go to Church, but since I was the assistant clerk, I had to be there. Because in case anybody joined Church, it was the clerk that had to put them on the roll and be in the office with the deacons when they questioned them about their faith. The two little boys who joined were the pastor's sons. They had read the scripture, it was youth Sunday, and it was the Samuel call narrative. And I almost dived under the bench. I was like, Oh my God. I am sitting there, and Sam and Andre join Church and then their little brother Jasper, who was four, came into the office and said he wanted to join church too.

And these seven and eight-year olds turn around — one had read this Scripture and the other one had read the responsive reading (because they are preachers, kids, they are very competent little Christians). They turn around to their little four-year-old brother and say, “If you join Church, you are going to have to get baptized and put your face in the water.” The four-year-old looked at them and said, “I have to put my face in the water?” They said yeah and he turned around and went right back out of the office. That was the end of his desire to join the church that Sunday. Do not worry, he is now very much ensconced, he did it later, when he was willing to put his face

in the water. But, if you can imagine, there is this conversation about these little children in this office and I am in shock! I am like, this is not a call. So, I had to struggle with that for a while.

But that paper turned out to be a providential piece of my story. When I started doing the work on the Sanctified Church, one of the things I told myself was, I need to take some of these courses. Because when I was out in the field, I was there the day that the Women's department introduced the new manual for teaching the Bible. I was taken to a ministers and missionaries meeting where this manual was introduced. Now, I am not sure what you know about the Church of God In Christ?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Oh, very familiar.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Okay, so you know a ministers and missionaries meeting. It is basically, the male elders and the women missionaries with a bishop — I know he was a bishop because I remember watching the power that he had in this meeting. But it was the day that they introduced the new Bible Study manual for the Church, and it was the women who introduced it. So, when I got down there to headquarters, remember, I am just coming off this dissertation, and this is a Church that does not ordain women. But you walk in and there are pictures of women. Now I am at Harvard 1981/1982. And I am like, wait a minute, because at the time, it was different: the only pictures you saw at Harvard were white males, and they were very white. That is all you saw.

And it was so bad that [Constance Buchanan](#) had to take the fellows to a meeting, where she explained to us that we should not feel bad when people do not speak to us. That is how hostile a place. White men did not speak to people beneath them. It was like the Apollo Pool Hall in Boston, which was a pool hall when the South End was still Black, where gangsters hung out. Your job, when you walked in the pool hall was you go to the back wall, and you greet everybody whose reputation outranked you, until you got to your place on the wall. And nobody spoke to anyone farther down the wall or on the sides of the pool hall near the door. That was how Harvard Divinity School was.

I realized while I was in Memphis, yeah, this Church, COGIC may be a masculinist patriarchal structure, but women matter. It was a whole different perspective. That is how I started paying attention to the roles of women in the Sanctified church. I had an oral history with a missionary from Church of God in Christ and at the time I interviewed her I did not realize the importance of her role, and what she was talking about when discussing her leaving the Church because of a conflict with the bishop. I went back later, and I have done a paper actually looking at the religion responses that I got from the women. Because I would do these oral histories and then I would have to ask them about things that they did not voluntarily mention, and most of the time

they did not mention anything about the Church. So, I would say, “What about the Church and religion, does that matter?”

They would respond that, of course. And I realized later they just assumed I knew all that because I was also Black. What do people tell you when they assume you already know? So how I got started on the Sanctified Church, my dad had made that mention at the dissertation defense, and I put this in the back of my mind. Then, that stuff all came together when I put together a research project and pursued it in 1981/1982. And that is how the article [“Together and in Harness”](#) was written.

I gave the first draft as a paper, as my lecture there with the Women’s Studies in Religion program and the head of it now, [Ann D. Braude](#) but Constance Buchanan was the person before that. Every other project that I have been doing has grown from questions that arose from that project. So, on my CV you will see a lot of papers, and obviously, as I am evolving and retiring, some of these unpublished papers will finally get redone, sent off, and published. Or, I also have some book projects I need to finish and one of them is the role of the Sanctified Church in our society. And I use the phrase “Sanctified Church” because Black folks developed that term. That was their way of speaking about a segment of the African American religious experience.

You know, you meet somebody, ask what church they belong to, and they say, “I am over in the Sanctified Church” and there are two things that can happen: You go, “Oh yeah, Okay”, or “Which one?” Then, they know that you know, and you really have conversations. So, the ethnographic, symbolic interactionist piece of me says start your research with the way in which the people you are studying name their world. And one of the things that I discovered as I started doing the research was if you went to the library and looked for the Sanctified Church, it was not there. Because the scholars had dismissed it as sects and cults. And Black scholars who knew better, had to go with that in order to get their dissertations done. So, for instance did [Chancellor Williams, the author of \*The Destruction of Black Civilization\*](#). He did his dissertation at American University (I have a copy of it in my files). His professors asked him to go out and study Black sects and cults in Washington, D.C. That was his assignment. He did the work, but he also gathered all this other data, which went beyond that. So, what did he do with his data? He wrote a novel titled, [Have You Been to The River?](#) And published it with Exposition Press. Harvard has a copy, in the library there at the Divinity school. That is how I found it. Then there is [Arthur Huff Fauset, the author of \*Black Gods of the Metropolis\*](#), he also had the same assignment. But folded into that mix is the sense of these churches really being what he calls a “Graduate Church.” We are talking about conversations and arguments, about theological agency on the part of Black folk.

And, the foundations, the roots of the Pentecostal movement, and this can be found in [Hollenweger’s first book](#); the first line in his introduction: Pentecostalism, began in a revival amongst the Negroes of North America. Boom! Yet when white American people write about it, they put Black folks in the footnotes.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is right, yeah.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Most people in Assemblies of God do not know that the Assemblies of God started because white men who were ordained by [C.H. Mason](#) were ashamed of the fact that they worshipped with Black people and segregated. But Black folks were talking about and struggling over a multiplicity of issues. Because I was asking the question as a sociologist, my work started, like I said, with a focus on social change. What happens when there is a cataclysmic social change? What do Black people do? They create new organizations.

Okay, here are these new churches. What problems were they trying to address? There is a diversity of problems that are at the founding of these churches that are both theological and Black experiential problems. So that is how the Sanctified Church stuff got started. The book that I am going to work on most assiduously, which is why I am teaching that course at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, is going to be *That Blessed Book: The Bible and the African American Cultural Imagination*, recognizing that. Even my work on Islam and the role of Muslims in shaping African American Christianity during slavery, all of that came out of questions that arose because I started studying the Sanctified Church, and I kept marching in different directions: Women issues, the socio-theological stuff, even the womanist stuff.

What drew me to [Alice Walker's](#) definition that she created, was that phrase in the third definition: Loves the Spirit (and spirit has a capital 'S'). Because this is central, movements of the spirit. I have a paper that James Cone told me to publish but I have not published, about movements of the spirit. But, you know, women are agents of that. And a lot of the tasks that we think of related to ministry, Women did and continue to do, and in some cases the battle is over. You know, three square feet, the pulpit.

One of the things that we do that is problematic in the way we approach this is, yes, we are discriminated against as women in terms of ordination. But we cannot not pay attention to what else women are doing. And we have a tendency not to do that well (well, I don't have that tendency, but yeah). We are so busy talking about how we are excluded from the pulpit, that we do not talk about what women are doing and how they are doing it. And how women's agencies even shape what is going on in the pulpit. So, I am big on that.

Does that answer your question?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Absolutely, actually you answered several questions.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

I wander off a bit.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Your wandering off actually allowed you to answer some other questions I had, so I think this is great. I think perhaps something we can think about towards the end of our time together is how you interpret the current state of the field of Black religious studies, is the current state something that you all could have even imagined, as you were carving a way forward?

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

Well, the explosion of published material, dissertations, the growth of Black Church studies programs and seminaries, especially Colgate Rochester. For instance, one of the things that happened a lot — many people do not know this — the first two major dissertations in what we think of as womanist area of Black Religious Studies, one was Katie Cannon, "[Black Womanist Ethics](#)". It was originally titled "Womanist Ethics" and the person who was editor at the press, the AARSBL Press at that time, was Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, and she added "Black" to the title (editors do stuff like that).

The other one is Jacquelyn Grant, "[White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus.](#)" Because AAR had this program of publishing dissertations, their dissertations went directly to publication, but that part of that publishing program was headed for bankruptcy. These two women also happen to be preachers. They also happen to be significant preachers. So, what happens when you are a Black woman preacher? You get invited to preach what? A lot of Women's Day's And yes, as we have said, it is a form of tokenism, and so many of my sisters' lament this, "Can I preach beyond Women's Day"? We have obviously moved great distances in the last forty years. But what does Women's Day represent? Very often in most churches, the collective will of women who have gotten together, figured out a theme, picked out a scripture, told the pastor who they want to be invited to come and preach. So, Katie would show up and say she would go to preach, people would come and shake her hand, and she said she learned all the different sorority handshakes because they were trying to figure out what sorority she belonged to, etc. But the minute they found out that the preacher had a book, these laywomen would order the books! Same thing with Jacquelyn Grant, people were ordering her book. They brought that publishing wing from AAR back from bankruptcy! Those two Black women preachers. Little things like that.

All the world is hungry for the living bread, and Black folks have always had something to say! Why did those folks who sat there and listened to, they tried to tell themselves that Black folks were happy when they were singing those spirituals. And somewhere down in there they — because people who wrote them down, there is a manuscript for a spiritual at Yale that I read in

the Beinecke collection where this woman who was the mistress is sitting, because they could not have unsupervised worship, is writing stuff down. And what is the spiritual that these happy people are saying? “You gotta die, die, die. You gotta die” I am amazed. This mistress faithfully wrote down every word! I hope it is somewhere in my notes. She wrote down every word of that spiritual. And the thing that we can ask and answer questions and do it in the context of an explosion of knowledge, the desire for knowledge. I mean it does not help that some of the seminaries are utilizing the Doctor of Ministry programs as a cash cow, and you got enough Black preachers who want “Doctor” in front of their name, so that adds to the motor going on. But the fact that people are asking and answering questions, how things have grown, especially in the AAR!

That is the other thing, religious studies have grown. It is not just Black church studies. American Academy of Religion used to be able to meet in one room, in 1968. [Preston Williams](#), the Afro-American religious history area that he started opened a door. It got more and more Black people there and participating and learning the administrative realities that go along with creating spaces to produce knowledge. Look what it has done. It helped Black doctoral students. The production of knowledge involves the production of dissertations, and that happened. But all this growth happened at precisely the same time as the growth of Black participation in other fields. Because remember, I am doing two areas, Sociology and Religious Studies. And the Caucus of Black Sociologists, which later became the Association of Black Sociologists, was responsible for creating something called the Minority Fellowship program in the American Sociological Association. This has exploded the participation, not only of Black people, but of Native American people of Latin X people, of Asian folks, they all you know. Because Black people are never allowed to do something just for themselves, that “might be racist”, you know. So, a whole bunch of other folks get pulled along when we when we move forward. And that has happened.

But the thing that happens with Black Church studies, which is different from white Church studies, if we could call it with talking about white folks. This is illustrative: we had this huge panel one time at AAR. about half of it was white women scholars and half of it was Black women scholars. Somebody asked the question, “How many of you are ordained?”

All but one of the Black women raised their hands, and only one white woman raised her hand. So, the connection between academics and the Church on the Black side, is still a very real connection for good or for ill. Sometimes we think that we should be able to tell the Church what to do. And the Church will sometimes respond “No, you are not going to tell us what to do.” But nevertheless, the connection is very real and palpable. We move in and out of those settings, in a way that white religious scholars do not move in and out of their Church settings. Unless it is on the conservative side, you know those conservative places where people are Southern Baptists and all those folks. But when you think of all the Black scholars that you know you know, how many of them are ordained? Or have a very close relationship with the Church? So that the conversation happens.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is a fascinating question. Even just thinking about the role of the Black religious studies scholar to broader publics; whether that be the Church, politics, or wherever people find themselves. I think that has evolved as well.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

I mean just look at [Calvin Butts' Funeral](#). It was an interesting event because we get, when he talks about the three big influences on his life: [Benjamin Mays](#), [Howard Thurman](#), and James Cone, were the three major influences on Calvin Butts. Did you hear Raphael Warnock's tribute?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

I did not.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

You are going to have to watch the whole funeral because it is really fascinating, who spoke who said what, and you learn this connection. We keep forgetting that Butts spent twenty years as a college President. Who was one of his mentors? Benjamin Mays. You will see the connection in the [HistoryMakers piece](#).

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is really impactful just to think about. All these interconnected histories and genealogies.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

And who preached Cones' funeral?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

[Raphael Warnock](#).

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

All those connections! And Raphael Warnock has a PhD and a book. James Cone single-handedly produced all these people, and helped FTE also produce people. That is the other thing, you must look at the Fund for Theological Education. Like I said, early on, I was one of the interviewers. And that is something that is not really visible.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is right.

Dr. Gilkes, this has been a fascinating conversation. You have offered and gifted us with so much, and I know there is always so much more. I just want to thank you.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

If you ever need a follow up, like I said my CV will give you some idea of the crazy ways in which I have lived my life, which is why I do not have a whole lot of books on my CV, but, boy, did I meet a lot of people! Because every time I do something at a professional meeting, I get to meet a lot of people.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

And that is really the beauty of the work, right? Engaging with people.

Thank you. I am going to stop the recording.