

Dr. Sylvester Johnson

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Sylvester A. Johnson, the founding director of the Virginia Tech Center for Humanities, is a nationally recognized humanities scholar specializing in the study of technology, race, religion, and national security. He is also associate vice provost for public interest technology at Virginia Tech and executive director of the university's Tech for Humanity initiative. Johnson, who holds a faculty appointment in the Department of Religion and Culture, has authored "The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity", a study of race and religious hatred that won the American Academy of Religion's Best First Book award; and "African American Religions, 1500-2000", an award-winning interpretation of five centuries of democracy, colonialism, and freedom in the Atlantic world. Johnson has also co-edited "The FBI and Religion: Faith and National Security Before and After 9/11". A founding co-editor of the Journal of Africana Religions, he has published more than 70 scholarly articles, essays, and reviews.

Transcript

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

My name is Ahmad Greene-Hayes. What is your full name?

Sylvester Johnson

[Sylvester Johnson](#).

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Awesome and do I have permission to record this interview?

Sylvester Johnson

Yes.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

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

Sylvester Johnson

I currently work at Virginia Tech, and I was previously at Northwestern University at Indiana University and at Florida A&M University.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Where were you trained in which disciplines?

Sylvester Johnson

In Union Theological Seminary in systematic theology with a focus on contemporary religious thought.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Awesome and who were your mentors, advisors, teachers at Union Seminary?

Sylvester Johnson

[James Cone](#) was my dissertation advisor. He also advised me in the MA program that I did there. There were numerous other faculty within my work, mostly [Vincent Wimbush](#), [Delores Williams](#), [James Washington](#), and [Christopher Morse](#) were among those who worked closely with me, Michael Wesley Harris as well was on the dissertation committee and [Judith Weisenfeld](#) was a member of my dissertation committee.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Tell me a bit more about your Graduate School experiences with these scholars.

Sylvester Johnson

So, I did my MA and PhD at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and in a word, terrific. I found incredibly helpful mentors who were kind, who had lots of empathy, who had very high standards, who were very engaging, and who were incredibly skilled at the work of mentorship. That was particularly true of James Cone, but it was uniformly true, I found to be, across the faculty at Union. There was a relatively small student body there the faculty were residential, so they lived — I think everyone lived — on campus at the time (now that has changed immensely). But the fact that the faculty lived on campus made it possible to have more engagement with, for example, special events that happen outside of regular class meetings.

It was not a situation where 50% of the faculty were not going to attend because they had to sit in traffic for three hours. They were right there so it made it easy to do those things, and because the students usually lived residential as well, on campus there was a sense of a close-knit tight

community. Union was intellectually innovacious. There was a very strong commitment to questions and issues of societal justice and equity that pervaded the students and the faculty. It was part of the administration. It was a place where people thought a lot about all kinds of things, but not in a mean-spirited way. Rather, more in a spirit of always seeking to contest things that that seem to be inhibiting societal good for more robust forms of equitable participation in society. Because of that, the combination of intellectual rigor and the social justice engagement made for what I found to be a very rich experience. That seemed to be true across the student body as well, it was one of the things that attracted Union students to the institution.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is really helpful. What courses do you remember taking in particular with James Cone?

Sylvester Johnson

Foundations in Systematic Theology, which was a large enrollment course that was introducing — Union was all grad students, it was master's and PhD — all students to systematic theology. He also taught a Martin and Malcolm seminar that was incredibly popular. He taught a course on suffering. There were other classes that I did, but those particularly stood out in my mind. The Foundations of Systematic Theology was the first course I took with him as the as the professor. I also did some independent studies with him and the God and suffering course, I remember I was taking that class, and my mother passed away during that seminar. That is why it sticks out of my mind. And the Martin and Malcolm class was very popular. He had written a [book on Martin and Malcolm](#) and the seminar grew out of it.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thinking about also taking courses with James Washington, I am curious to hear about those courses.

Sylvester Johnson

Anyone who studied with James Washington would tell you he was encyclopedic — literally — in his ability to cite, quote and refer to many different sources. Very intertextual as a lecturer. So, I did a course that was like a graduate survey of African American religions. I cannot remember exactly how it was phrased, but it was running over, examining the period spanning the 17th and 18th centuries to what were then contemporary moments in the 20th century (as this was the 1990s) and that was that was great.

James Washington was very well skilled as a historian; he was incredibly gifted as a lecturer and very personable. As for courses with other faculty members as well, Vincent Wimbush was there

at the time, and he was developing what emerged as [African Americans and the Bible](#) project. He was fond of saying which is and is not about African Americans in the Bible. It was a way of making what, in hindsight, seems like what should be an obvious point, but actually is not. He said that the Bible is not an ancient book. It is a modern book; it is a modern document. It is not an ancient document. To this, most of the eyebrows were raised, heads would turn, and the brows would crinkle. He would expound, if you knew anything about the history of printing you know that the Chinese developed block printing. The movable type press emerged many centuries later, not until the 1400's. If you look at any manuscripts, Christian, Jewish, or Islamic, you will find it is not possible to fit the contemporary Christian Canon inside of two covers, because it would require incredibly minuscule writing. What typically happened was one might have a book of a song, so a book of the Gospels as a codex. But the first time one gets a codex, that is what people today think of as the Bible, that is only because of printing technology. That is the only thing that made it possible. So even when people say things like, "the Bible or scriptures" that never meant a book as a codex between two covers, until after the printing press. It had always been many different writings and many different tones. That is just one way he would begin to introduce that. I took his African Americans and the Bible seminar he did. I also did a course with him on John's Gospel which was an amazing seminar. Really excellent attention to getting down into the weeds with things that one can do in a grad seminar, about Johannine communities and the power dynamics.

I also studied with [Randall Styers](#) who was there at the time. He was terrific in bringing to Union intellectual communities, what people would call, critical theory and poststructuralism. And then of course, [Phyllis Trible](#)'s intro to Hebrew scriptures. I did a course with Delores Williams on womanist theology. I just really appreciated the engagement that all the faculty gave. I did a course with Christopher Morse on church dogmatics, and that was his study of [Karl Barth](#), we read Barth's [Church Dogmatics](#). It was a really terrific close engagement, learning an appreciation for his work. Those are faculty and courses that have stayed in my mind that I am recalling right now (if I think of something else in a few minutes, I can add to it).

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is such a fascinating, eclectic group of scholars to have studied with and under. I am curious to hear how those courses and those experiences with them shaped your dissertation. What was your dissertation about, and how did being at Union in particular produce your interest in that work?

Sylvester Johnson

Michael Wesley Harris was part of those faculties — he was on my dissertation committee — so I did a seminar with him on historiographical methods which was really terrific. He was very keen to cultivate the training of students in a way that really brought to the fore this close attention to methodology. That was very useful for those of us who were including archival

methods in our research. He is just another faculty member who comes to mind. So that is one way Michael Wesley Harris influenced my dissertation. Judith Weisenfeld is another faculty member. She was an adjunct member at Union, (she held an appointment at Columbia University's Barnard College at the time). She had a tremendous influence on my work as well. She offered training in historiographical methods, and historical methodology. I did a seminar with her on African American religions. Then, she agreed to be on my committee for the dissertation. Her influence on that work was very impactful in helping me to understand some of the ways that the narrative of the Black Church can elide a lot of important histories, if that is taken too literally, and just used as a substitute for Black religion. Christopher Morse was on the dissertation committee and his work was really helpful in helping me to engage in a serious, and not cynical way, with the larger history of Christianity. Because of our training in liberation theology and methods of attending very closely to BIPOC histories — and analytical frames that closely examine structures of colonialism, race and gender hierarchies and heteronormativity — it was easy to be unnuanced in examining the way these historical structures have found a lot of support in life in organized Christianity. And Morse was always keen to get us to treat these traditions and their complexity. Everyone did that, but he was especially focused on that, I think. So that was very helpful to me. Of course, the biggest influence on my work was Cone. Initially my dissertation was about a study of religious hatred in the United States, in the 19th century. Particularly, by looking at the Noah legend and how the legend of Noah and Noah's descendants, particularly the mythical descendant of Ham, had been used to not only justify slavery but also to create a claim about the origins of the Black race.

That was something I eventually landed on as a dissertation project, and I ended up publishing a book about that. But I actually first proposed a dissertation on religion in the life of [Du Bois](#). I ended up changing the topic because I went through the process that a lot of graduate students go through, trying to figure out things. I got along further with an idea before I changed it, and I had actually proposed a dissertation topic and most people by the time they get to that point, have landed on what they are going to end up with. But I eventually landed on the topic that was right for me at that time, and it was a great experience.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

How would you describe your research agenda?

Sylvester Johnson

It was a combination of locating historical sources that would help me to understand the utility and effects of this Noah legend. A lot of that was historical and some of it was really trying to understand the way postcolonial theory and studies of race could inform the analysis of that material. Some of it was engaging with the traditions of scripture interpretation. Even some of the origins of textual traditions, particularly the Noah legend, which has its roots in Babylonian literature. Then, the long histories of interpreting and reinterpreting. So, I approached the project

by bringing together those threads and eventually ended up with a project that was foregrounding the way the Noah legend functioned quite generatively, unfortunately, to weaponize this legend in ways that vilified African religions.

It was a very perverse way of offering a portal of entry to people who were racialized as Black, into a world that was biblically imagined. So, to think about the origins of the world within the frame of these scriptural traditions was to think about Biblical myths and legends of human origins: Adam and Eve; the tower of Babel; focusing on the ancient Near East. So, "biblical lands" as a way of trying to think about the origins of people of the world — even though we know today that homo sapiens began in southern Africa. But that is not the biblical frame, which is actually something entirely different, that is fictitious. Anyhow, I was trying to bring together those things in order to make that legible to a contemporary readership, who I think would benefit from trying to understand the role of the American history of these scriptures that had shaped very important traditions around race and religious identity.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That is really helpful.

I have two questions that are related. The first is, how do you identify methodologically as a scholar of Black religion? The second is, could you elaborate on where your research has gone in the aftermath of your time at Union?

Sylvester Johnson

Are you asking me how I identified at the time I was doing dissertation, or how do I identify as a religion scholar?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

It is open-ended. I think both would be helpful.

Sylvester Johnson

Methodologically — meaning historical methods as a culture theorist and that kind of thing — my training was in systematic theology with a focus on contemporary religious thought. So, at the time I identified as a scholar of religion, I knew that I wanted to ground the work I was doing in archival sources. But I did not want to be constrained by that. So, I certainly did not call myself a historian, period. But I do remember using phrases like scholar of religious history, or religion and race. I remember using phrases like historian of religion, even though by my training I was very aware of the fact that people who have PhD's in history — this is a generalization — often take exception to people who do not have history PhD's referring to

themselves as historians. And I was not interested in trying to get anybody to accept me who did not want to. So, I did not want to play that game. But I also recognize that because my training was in a theological school, the way I got trained was very different from the way people get trained at secular universities. That, secular universities are products of nation states. These theological schools got their paradigm of training centuries before there was any such thing as a nation state.

So, at Union there were four tracks: systematic theology, church history, biblical studies, and a track much more geared toward parish ministry (I am trying to remember how it was framed, that is not what it was called). But you get a sense of what I am laying out here. My track was systematic theology, but when I went to Union, I went there planning to specialize in Christian origins, which would have been biblical studies. And I never lost my interest in that, so I studied the whole language, Greek and Hebrew and Latin. I was very interested in early scriptural traditions that looked like and walked like things that people call patristics, early Judaism and early Christianity. But I was also in this systematic theology track. I was always aware of the fact that, because I went to theological school and not a secular university, I was getting shaped as a scholar, in ways that were not dependent on picking a region of the world, which one must do when studying the nation state in a secular university. And it was not based on a time period, which one must do if training in a secular university (usually, there are exceptions to that trend). I think if you had asked me at the time, what was the difference between being trained at a theological school and a secular university, I am not sure I could have told you as precisely as I am telling you right now. But the difference is that, because these theological schools train you to study a religious tradition — you have to think about it this way: what part of the world should be the focus of your attention if you are studying the Christian, Jewish, or Islamic tradition? The answer there is that there is not a part of the world, but these are global things. So, I did not get trained to identify myself with the part of the world, with a region like America, Europe or the Middle East, because that is not how these religious traditions work. Nor did I get trained to think in terms of a time period, like modernity or the medieval period or antiquity because, I guess the closest way one could have gotten trained in that method was in biblical studies. And even then, there is some slippage. But it certainly was not true for systematic theology.

So, I walked away from Union with a PhD in systematic theology with a specialization in contemporary religious thought, which did not mean that I only study contemporary things. One is expected to be able to study that tradition across all those periods. And that does not mean that one does not focus on a particular period, but they are supposed to know the tradition, and at least classically — because this has changed a little — one cannot know the Jewish, Islamic, or Christian tradition and not know it across those time periods. One should be able to read those texts, in those languages in which they were written, even if a contemporary religious thought person (classically, we can find exceptions to this). That would not have been true at a secular university. While I was at Union, things like American religion, religious history or religion in the Americas were taking off. They were getting shaped, and departments were starting to create those programs and tracks. So, I left there knowing that I had these interests that span periods. And by periods, I mean thousands of years. I left there knowing that I was interested in lots of

places in the world. I studied with faculty who taught about East Asia, West Africa or South Africa, and Latin America.

So, when I took my first position, the tenure track out of Union at Florida A&M University (which was my first teaching position when I left Union) I was in a program of philosophy and religion — there were only two faculty and religious studies there, by the way — so I taught many kinds of classes, and that actually worked well for the way my mind worked, the way I got trained. I thought across lots of different periods and different geographies. But while I was at Florida A&M, what I realized was that there was this area called American Religions that was operationalizing the talent of people who could be legible as scholars of African American religions. Scholars of Black religion, or scholars of religion in the United States. So, by the time I published [*The Myth of Ham*](#), I had gotten hip to that game, so to speak, and I do not mean that cynically because it is not a game.

These are ways that professional scholars are organizing and indicating how they are doing their work and their specialization. What I mean is that had become legible to me. And that was not legible to me as I was being trained in grad school. If you could go through my emails and find out how I am referring to myself when I am, say around 2005 or 2006, you may see something like “Scholar of religious studies, American religions and African American religions.” Then, when I went to Indiana, I was hired to teach African American religions. Not only that, but I was hired as a specialist in African American religions. And it would only make sense that I embraced that because it was certainly true to my training, and I trained with James Cone. I studied immensely about race and religion that had a lot to do with the United States, even though it was not only the United States. Certainly, at Northwestern that was true as well. And I went there of course, in the Department of African American Studies. So, it only made sense that I would embrace the fact that my training, that my scholarship, positioned me optimally to be in a Department of African American Studies as a scholar of African American studies or Black studies who was an expert in religion. And that is what Northwestern was interested in. We can talk more about this later, but they were trying to support the operation of African American studies, in the way that did not ignore religion but was actually engaged with religion. So, my hire there was really the way that was going to happen, and to operationalize that. So, there is religious studies, there is African American Studies, there is American religions or religions in the America. I was also a young scholar of American religions (well, 2005/2006 which is part of that legibility). So, that is long winded, but hopefully it gets to your question.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

It sounds like what you are naming, and I wonder how much James Cone has to do with this, I read Cone as, of course, a systematic theologian, but one who had a sensibility for the archive of Black religious life, just in his own interpretations of Black people’s theologizing. And it makes sense to me why one could come up under him and be exposed to a vast array of methods or approaches to the study of Black religion.

That said, I am curious to hear more from you about how your teacher — and here I am thinking about James Cone, but please feel free to comment on the many others in his orbit — shaped the field of Black religion as you understood it then and now? And perhaps what lessons did you learn from them?

Sylvester Johnson

That is a good question. I would say first, and you will have to go back and count because the number that I am going to give you is too low, Cone personally trained and credentialed more than 31 Black PhDs. And that was in the 1990s. He continued teaching and training students until he died. Even though in the 90s I remember him saying, “Oh yeah, you know, you are probably going to be my last student, Sylvester. Or I will be training one more, then I am going to retire.” He kept doing this until his death. So that alone, if you go and count the number of Black PhD’s who are trained in some way or fashion to be scholars of religion or theology, that one human being individually training and credentialing more than 31 people is immensely significant. That deserves its own discussion right there. So that was one way in which he impacts the field of religious studies or theological studies.

Another way, of course, he had this outsized influence — he was called the father of Black theology — on liberation theology. He was a leader in a global movement called the [Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians](#) (that acronym was often shortened as EATWOT). The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, Cone felt that was the most important movement that was happening in theology in the 20th and 21st century. Some people were saying that theology as a discipline is not as important now as it used to be because we have this new thing called religious studies, these departments started to pop up in the 1970s. He would say that there are a lot of important things happening in theology and the most important thing that is happening is actually this Third World movement. There are many reasons why he would make that claim. But to the point of your question of how did Cone’s influence shape the field, it was training people to study theology, to study religion. Understanding, as he loved to say, that theology is about fighting. He would always start his introductory course in foundations of theology with that statement. That theology is about fighting.

Then he would explain what he meant by that. It is anyone who has studied the history of religious conflicts and politics that can appreciate that. People have killed one another, and these religious wars have dominated and enslaved one another in the name of religion. That, what we think of as theological doctrines has often been very much a reflection of the political conflicts, and the findings that have gone on that often have been lying for dead. So, he really wanted to foreground the fact that theology was not just some distant, benign enterprise that was removed from the grit of the world. Rather, that it was a high stakes affair. Lots of things were going on and that is true across time periods. It was no less true today than it was 1000 years earlier. So, I think his ability to train multiple generations of scholars who could absorb that fact, interpret the study of theology, for their own context was important. For people who were students of Cone or working with him, we were often called “Cone-heads.” So, I was called a “Cone-head” and the

point of that reference, which was of course meant to be derisive, was to say that “You are just one of those Cone people. You are a Cone Clone. You are just learning to be like Cone, think like him, and just replicate his work.” One of the things that anyone who studied with Cone quickly learned, because he would ingrain this sentence, is that he had no desire for people to do what he did. His point was that I have done what I did. And of course, you know his scholarship, he did not just do one thing. He did many different kinds of projects. He was deeply opposed to any of his students just trying to do what he did. His point was that anyone who wanted to take up the mantle of scholarship needed to find their voice. They needed to figure out what their role was going to be, what their intervention was going to be, and they needed to cultivate their skill in that way. So, I think it was actually very positive to have that as a central message from an advisor. He was not trying to get us to do his project — he was he was trying to train generations of Black scholars to do good work that was rigorous and engaged in a truthful, grounded way, with the very real interests that were at stake in our global world. And he did that with integrity. He put a lot of himself into the mentorship of his students.

Now to give an example, whenever you submitted something to Cone — and he lived on campus — you would drop it in his mailbox (this is back when people printed out things and slipped it into someone's mailbox). Today is Wednesday, so you would give it to him today then he would call you tomorrow morning, Thursday morning, and say, “well, I read [whatever you gave him]. Come by [where he lived, in faculty apartments there] tomorrow afternoon or this afternoon at three o'clock or four o'clock and we can talk about it.” He would read it the same day, mark it up and give all this written feedback. But he also had these conversations with you, that is just how he did it. There was no, two weeks later you got feedback from him. It was within 24 hours, and it was always a conversation. Those were very instrumental in crafting with care people who took the work seriously. He had high standards, but he was not mean spirited in his feedback. He was encouraging. He loved to say, “Sylvester, this is not your best work. I want to see your best work, and this is not it.” That was a very kind way of saying this doesn't meet the standard, without making me feel like I didn't belong. It was a call for me to act like I belonged and to bring my A game. To dig deeper within myself and to buckle down even more firmly to raise the game and produce the best work. That was very important to him. He was not there to try to set people up to fail or make them feel like they should not be there. It was quite the opposite. So, I think the care with which he did that and the integrity with which he did that, is something I appreciated then and I appreciate it now, and that benefited me tremendously. I never walked around afraid that the institution is against me and that I have to fight for my survival in this place. I felt like my advisor was going to make sure that I had every chance to succeed in this enterprise, but that I was going to have to bring my best work. I was not going to get there on the cheek. I needed to do my best work and if I did, I was going to be fine. I just needed to do my best work. I think the love and ethical integrity that structured that type of mentorship is incredibly valuable and is very needed.

I have talked long enough I am not even sure I answered all your questions, but I think the point about the number of people he trained is important and I think the point of him not wanting people to feel like they needed to go to Union and become Cone — they needed to learn how to be themselves and they needed to do the work in order to do that. I think that is important.

Because that was characteristic of his mentorship style. Cone knew he was popular, he stayed on the lecture circuit (I don't know how much he made on the lecture circuit), but he did not feel a need to replicate himself. He was not suffering from any kind of insecurity. That meant that he could unlock his generosity toward people and toward his students, without making them feel like they needed to be intimidated, or that they needed to conform to something that he was doing. He wanted us to understand that our work was to figure out what it is that we as individuals were supposed to do, and then to do that to the highest standard.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Yeah, that is such a profound reflection on his influence and his mentoring style, which I really appreciate. You mentioned that you had taken a course with Delores Williams and perhaps one of the most exemplary cases of Cone's impact perhaps might be the formation of womanist theology and ethics at Union.

I am curious to hear from you more about what it was like to be there in the early 90s, in the aftermath of all that work in the 80s. And what it was like to have taken a course with Delores Williams.

Sylvester Johnson

Delores was great. I took a seminar with her on Women's theology. She was really dynamic in her teaching and mentorship. She was very capable of and committed to getting students in her seminars to engage with some of these difficult challenges of religious traditions. [Her book that she published on Womanist Theology](#) focused on Hagar, who in the Islamic tradition is very significant and has different points of interpretation in Christianity and has gotten less attention. And she really focused on Hagar as a figure who represented what Delores Williams called the legacy of surviving, and not necessarily being liberated. She would ask the question, what if part of the output, part of the potency, of the best of the Christian tradition is not necessarily something that brings people liberation, because there are too many human beings walking around, not liberated, but who find resources for surviving whatever atrocities they face in their lives through this religious tradition, Christianity? And of course, she was part of that generation that was critiquing the sexism, or the heteronormativity, that were part of earlier iterations of Black theology.

So, the students really appreciated and absorbed that critique and what was correct about that which she was bringing. So, as you alluded to, she was a student of Cone, she was one of the students who Cone trained. Then she went on to eventually become a faculty member at Union. It was instructive. I knew Cone really well because I worked with him in my MA programs, it was a couple of years then I did the PhD program, which was another five years, and I was his research assistant for most of that time (not all, but most of it), so we got to know each other really well. We had lots of conversations together.

There were several things that I saw that I thought were incredibly helpful, that helped me to understand how to be a better human being, not just a better scholar. One of them, to your point graduate schools can foster a lot of cynicism. The way humanities PhD programs are structured, we call it learning to critique things. But much of it functions as learning to criticize things. And I think to a fault we do a poor job, usually, teaching people to distinguish between those. We often operationalize what we call learning the art of critique, about teaching people to criticize, and most graduate students are like other human beings their age. There are people at different ages when they do graduate study but there is a trend that many people go to Graduate School not too long removed from having graduated from college. Not too far removed from having finished high school (that is not true of everyone, just true of most of the people in these graduate programs). So, there is also less life experience there. That is not to say that people who are younger cannot be incredibly astute and judicious. It is to say that life experience can, and often does help people bring a greater level of temperance to whatever they are doing. So, it is easy for these settings to become places where people become cynical and criticize without actually doing the hard work of critique, because that that includes self-critique.

So, it was instructive to be in that environment where so much of Union was very much a place with the intellectual rigor of Graduate School and Union trained people for parish ministry, for Church ministry, who were not going to become professional researchers. So, there were also people there who were studying to become leaders of faith communities. Both of those things, whether they were there to do parish ministry or to become professional researchers, tied to issues of social justice and caring about how people's lives play out, in part, as a consequence of how these structural systems of religion, theology, and authority are actually getting put into effect. So, when you put those things together, it can often, but not always, become a space where it is easy to criticize everything. I remember a conversation that students were having about womanist theology and Black theology. That, Black Theology makes patriarchy and womanist theology is bringing these important correctives and basically, in that setting Delores Williams is the corrective to James Cone. If you understand that dynamic, Cone was very careful not to act defensive. Because part of his teaching was to take people through these different iterations of theological movements, and to try to show that over time someone comes along, and they do or say something, and they have this framework. Then, someone else comes along after them and they find problems with what was before, and they try to improve on and correct it. Then someone comes after them, and it just never ends. And he talked about that as a good thing. People should be trying to figure out whatever theme they are in; whatever tradition you find yourself in, how do you make it better? And if you can tell the truth about the problems, at least you have a chance to fix the problems. If you won't ever admit to the problems, you are never going to fix the problems. Even if what you end up with is not perfect, you can make it better than it was, so he emphasized that. But he also tried to emphasize to people that everyone has blinders and everyone, if you scrutinize their lives, is somehow caught up and implicated in things that are worthy of critique. His point was, it is not so much an issue of who is above critique, because no one is. The issue is when people point out to you the problems that are part of whatever you are doing, how do you respond? When people point it out to you and when you have a chance to see it, do you start to antagonize those people? Or do you come clean and say you know what yeah, that is true. I need to do better; we need to do better. That is not just a

scholarly thing — it is a human thing. But I just remember that dynamic because part of being there at the time was, I won't call it a contest of liberation isms because that sounds cynical, and I am not cynical about it. I actually really appreciate the fact that I had a chance to go to a place where people cared about the interests that were at stake, and the lives of people throughout our world mattered. That was actually mainstream at Union.

It is not like there was some fringe group of people who thought it was important. If you did not think that was important and you were at Union, you were actually the fringe, and you probably were not going to find it an easy place to do your work. Because people would keep bringing up these questions about the impact of whatever we are doing on the world. You would probably find it annoying. But, if you thought that was important, you would find yourself in the company of people who would then begin to really challenge one another in a very generative way. So that is a little bit of what it was like. Delores Williams was an amazing presence on that faculty and the work that she did was also certainly important in shaping my own scholarship.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you for that. I appreciate the nuance that you have provided for that moment. I think we do a disservice without naming the complexity of it all — the beautiful complexity of it all, I would say.

I wanted to raise another question, and this is one that some folks who have participated in this project really sit with for a moment, and it is one I would like to ask precisely because I think it invites us to think of all these scholars as intellectual ancestors in the tradition of Africana religions. I am wondering, if you could speak to Cone and to his contemporaries who have passed on, what would you say to him?

Sylvester Johnson

What would I say with respect to their role as intellectual ancestors?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Yeah, that's fine. Or if there is any kind of reflection, or offering if you will, that you would like to offer.

Sylvester Johnson

I would say — you know, Ahmad, you have been in a PhD program — there is a lot of strife and suffering in PhD's. Graduate School is not a paradise. It can be a very fraught place. It is a place where people often struggle to find their way as human beings. Meaning it is easy to get derailed. It is easy to get overwhelmed by all kinds of expectations. There are mental wellness challenges

that exist in abundance at universities at large; in undergraduate programs. And I am not trying to portray universities as some special place where if we could just leave them, we would be in paradise. It is part of the rest of the world, the rest of the world is also a hard place. Graduate School is no escape from that. And because you are in this intense pressure cooker, there is a goal line, and then there is a timeline. You are a student with people who are accomplished. They have done things — it is not that they do not have troubles — but particularly for people who are senior scholars, they have already proven themselves so that they are not fighting to keep a job. So, it could easily be the case that it becomes a Hellish kind of existence.

I feel very lucky to have had incredibly generous mentors, and it's everyone from Judith Weisenfeld. For example, I remember she had published her essay in an edited volume and someone who reviewed that volume had pointed out her essay because in the eyes of this reviewer, she was the one person who was not toeing the line of Christian identity. Supposedly she was not genuflecting enough for them. So, I was wrestling with some of my own things going on with me, and I asked her if I could talk with — and she was kind, people are busy, but she was very kind and had lunch with me and listened to my woes and gave me some really good advice. But that was my experience in Graduate School, people would take time and they were kind. So, the first thing I would say to Delores Williams, James Washington, James Cone, [Charles Long](#), and I have said this to Judith multiple times, is the gratitude I would have to express. That they were kind enough to be so careful and so ethical in their comportment and in the way that they were engaging people who often, you know graduate students can be very presumptuous — I know I was.

I did not arrive at this highly cultivated purpose; I showed up as who I was. I had all kinds of things to learn, and they were very patient teachers. I think that is important and I also realized that a lot of people cannot say that. A lot of people will tell you they survived Graduate School. That, it was not a place where they thrived but a place where they fought for their lives. So, I also feel very lucky that that was not my experience, and it could have been, but it was not. I would also say, let me put it this way. I remember I was at a conference with Vincent Wimbush where one of his books was the object of critique at some book panel. It was mostly graduate students and a couple of younger scholars who were responding to his book. I think it was *African Americans and the Bible*, maybe it was another book. But anyhow, as I said graduate programs often teach people to become criticizers rather than people who know the art of critique. We may say that we think there is a difference, but if you watched how we operationalize it, you will recognize pretty quickly that we are teaching people to become criticizers. So, it was a panel of criticizers. But Wimbush was not unkind, he was very kind to the people in his comments. I remember he said something to them that will always stick with me. He said that when you read people you should always remember that the people you are reading are people. These are actual human beings. He said, you do not have to agree with them. But you should try to remember that when you are reading someone's work that you are reading a person. I mean, the book is not the person, but a person really is. And what you are responding to is a person. So that when you disagree with them, you should disagree with them as if you are disagreeing with the person and not just some thing; not some caricature. If I had a dollar for every time I participated in or witnessed others in my cohort participating in this, raking the

coals over our intellectual ancestors, we could dine at a five-star restaurant for months. I mean, I have seen this so many times, and those intellectual ancestors — and what we are really doing is standing on their shoulders and slapping them on the head, as if we are not standing on their shoulders. Because if we had to get off their shoulders and put our feet on the ground, we could not even reach their knees, let alone their head. But we stand on their shoulders and like to slap them around. What I have come to appreciate is that those intellectual ancestors let us get up on their shoulders. And even when we start to slap them on the head, they do not throw us down and stomp us. They helped us to move a little bit further and they tried to convey to us that is one of the most important lessons we can learn. How are you going to position yourself so that you are enabling other people to move things further along and not make it about you?

Because, when I look at Charles Long — who was not a faculty member who taught me but was very much a mentor, someone who kindly engaged with, I showed up at the conference he was presenting in and told him I was a fan, can we talk. I am sure you heard that thousands of times, but he had a conversation with me, a phone chat, and we started to correspond, and he gave me great feedback and encouragement on my work. But I would want to say to those people that I understand the project that they were operating, and I get it. I really appreciate and have tremendous gratitude for what their project was. Their project was not just their books and articles — *we* were their project in some ways. And that I get it.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you for that. Just to think about the work as extending beyond the individual, thinking about it as a collective effort. And thinking about all of them as co-laborers essentially is so insightful.

My last question for you is, we have talked a great deal about the past and perhaps the present of the field, where do you want to see the field go?

Sylvester Johnson

That is a great question. I could say something corny like onward and outward. But what I mean by that is — I direct a humanities center now. My job requires me to interpret and leverage opportunities. To bring greater visibility to the work of humanistic, human centered scholarship. Not just one discipline, many different disciplines. And to do so in a way that is not built on resentment, such as, “You do not appreciate us humanities people!” That is not a strategy. You can yell loudly about people not appreciating you, but you have not really changed the game. You should come up with a strategy. As I think more and more about what the strategy is for actually examining this work, examining and advancing this work — and there is no single strategy — part of it is recognizing that the students we teach and the scholarship we produce should be part of these larger efforts to operate in our society, relevant to all kinds of things. We write articles questioning the value of humanities. But then we also love to beat our chests and complain that these technical things are endangering our human/humanistic world. For example,

democracy is in jeopardy because of social media, according to one New York Times critic. I think there are other things that are higher up on the list than technology threatening democracies, such as inequality or mass incarceration.

But I think at a time where we need more expertise in understanding of the kinds of issues that scholars of religion and Africana religion scholars study, and other humanities scholars, I would like to say that I hope the field exercises a boldness in probing what some people might call interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinary (that is one way to say it so that people will quickly recognize a part of what I am trying to talk about). And by the upward I think that we must — to the degree that Black religious scholarship has always been tethered in some meaningful way to an array of concerns about human wholeness and social justice. Note, I am not trying to reduce it to that. I do not think everybody who studies African religions must focus on equity and justice. No, you do not, you should get to choose your project. Other people get to choose their work, I think that should be true about religious scholars. But to the degree that has been very much a part of it — it is not the whole thing — I think it becomes important to be strategic about ensuring the long-term viability of this enterprise. I think that requires thinking beyond the academic institutions. There have to be institutions, instruments and capital that make it possible for people to do this work. If we think that the only way that is going to happen is only theological schools and universities, then I think we must think more deeply. And that is part of what I mean by the upward; let's elevate our purview on the institutional instruments that need to be leveraged to ensure the long-term viability of this work. That is going to take some imagination, but we have plenty of that. So those are two things I would say, the outward and the upward.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you so much, Dr. Sylvester Johnson, for your time.

Sylvester Johnson

Thank you for this project that I think is a terrific one. I am really glad to see that you are putting this together and I look forward to seeing the output.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Absolutely thank you.