

Religion & Reproductive Justice



Religion—the belief and participation in a particular system of faith and worship—has long been an important aspect in the lives of Black people in the U.S. Denied the right to find solace in the African Traditional Religions of their homeland, slaves were forced to embrace a form of white Christianity. Black slaves were also denied the right to gather, out of fear that they would plan uprisings to liberate themselves. Instead, they were “forced to meet in secret locations at night called ‘hush harbors’ to combine their African traditional religious practices with their understanding of a Christianity centered on a God that would free Black people from slavery rather than a slaveholding Christianity that taught obedience and passivity to their enslavement.”²⁸⁹

Their strong faith in God as a source of hope and inspiration gave enslaved Africans the strength to endure—and it has also been the source from which Black people draw the fortitude needed to continue the struggle against the horrors of racism, sexism, classism, and white supremacy.

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that Black Americans are more religious than the American public overall.²⁹⁰ Almost two-thirds (64%) of Black women who participated in the survey reported that religion was an important aspect of their lives.²⁹¹ Black women were more likely to say that they have faith in a divine power or God that guides them in being moral people, compared to Black men.²⁹²

For many Black women, femmes, girls, and gender-expansive individuals, God is involved in their struggle for survival and their moral decision-making. Womanist theologian Delores Williams observes that Black women understand “making a way out of no way” as a personal testimony about a higher power that supports their struggle for equality, liberation, and justice.²⁹³ Black women, femmes, girls, and gender-expansive individuals embrace a set of moral precepts that often do not conform to traditional normative ethical systems but that allow them to live, and have an accounting of their lives, on their own terms.²⁹⁴ Black women’s exercise of moral agency to achieve liberation necessarily occurs at the intersections of race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression.²⁹⁵

What happened on that auction block centuries ago is still unfinished business for African American women today.

— Dr. Gail E. Wyatt

At the same time, religion has long been weaponized to shame, blame, and control Black women’s reproductive and sexual health. The Black church has used religion to institute respectability norms and classify “good” versus “bad” Black women. The Black church has promoted oppressive theological teachings that deny Black women’s, femmes’ girls’, and gender-expansive individuals’ reproductive and sexual agency, and to promote false narratives that Black women have hypersexual,

animalistic desires and an uncontrollable breeding capability.²⁹⁶ These myths and tropes originate in white supremacy and evolved from enslavement in order to justify the dehumanization and degradation of Black bodies.

The Reproductive Justice movement, while not religion-centered, encompasses ancestral and Protestant theories of autonomy, dignity, ethics, self-determination, equity, leadership, and liberation. Black

women and other women of color of faith and spirituality have always been present in the RJ movement, although intentionally centering this intersection is a newer, although necessary, concept. Black women, femmes, girls, and gender-expansive individuals who identify as people of faith have applied womanist liberation epistemologies to expand the vital intersection of RJ and faith.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts to control Black women’s, femmes’ girls’, and gender-expansive individuals’ reproduction and sexuality run counter to the concepts of free-will and moral authority upon which most religious traditions rest.²⁹⁷ Decisions about sexual activity, same-gender loving relationships, and autonomy over whether and when to have a child must rest squarely in the hands of the individual—not the government or any church.

- ***Prevent “religious freedom” from hampering access to comprehensive sexual health education***

Sexual health education must be evidence-based in order to ensure that young people have the information and tools they need for lifelong sexual health and well-being. Moral or religious interpretations should not be allowed to justify withholding medically accurate information that empowers young people to make the best decisions about their own lives and bodies.

- ***Ensure that “religious freedom” is not an excuse for discrimination***

Housing providers are able to use the mantle of “religious freedom” to discriminate against vulnerable populations, including Black women, femmes, girls, and gender-expansive individuals who identify as non-Christian and/or are LGBTQ+, living with HIV/AIDS, disabled, unmarried, etc. Religious freedom must not be allowed to be weaponized against the right to housing.

- ***Do No Harm Act (H.R. 1378)***

Introduced in 2021 by Representatives Bobby Scott (D-VA), Steve Cohen (D-TN), Jamie Raskin (D-MD) and Mary Gay Scanlon (D-PA), this legislation would restore the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) to its original purpose: to protect religious exercise and ensure that religious freedom is not used to erode civil rights protections. The legislation seeks to address the sharp rise in RFRA’s misapplication to justify discrimination on the basis of “religious freedom.” The bill would limit the use of RFRA in cases involving discrimination, child labor, child abuse, wages, collective bargaining, access to health care, public accommodations, and social services provided through government contracts.