NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

A foundation laid by black women

Diana L. Hayes | Jun. 23, 2010

JESUS, JOBS, AND JUSTICE: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND RELIGION
By Bettye Collier-Thomas
Published by Alfred A. Knopf, $37.50

Finally we meet the foot soldiers in the long slog to freedom for Americans of African descent: They are the black women in the black, and white, churches of the United States. To introduce them, the author goes behind the façade of black male ministers -- historically the face of the movement.

Bettye Collier-Thomas? *Jesus, Jobs and Justice* is a massive work that details the story of black women?s roles in building up the black community and its churches. Her research is excellent. Womanist scholars have previously focused on particular women as symbols of the civil rights struggle -- Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Mcleod Bethune and Dorothy Height. Collier-Thomas weaves into that U.S. history the stories of countless other women. We meet the black women in the predominantly white -- Episcopal, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic -- church where rarely have the names of any but a few of these women been lifted up for the recognition they justly deserve.

The women?s efforts are seen not in isolation but in conjunction with the efforts of black women nationwide -- but especially in the South -- in a civil rights struggle that was twofold: At the same time they fought for black women and men to be recognized as human beings, the women had to struggle for religious rights within the black churches. The irony of the black church is that of all Christian churches built with the pennies, nickels and dimes women helped to raise. Women, who provide so much of the financial support, who are the backbone of the ministers and bishops, have historically been denied the rights of full membership: leadership roles, ordination, self-autonomy.

Black men fought against opening church leadership to women, who oftentimes were those same male leaders? main support. Sadly buying into the patriarchal rhetoric, there were very few black men courageous enough to recognize the equality of women and men. The women persisted and persevered. They became deacons, ordained ministers and finally, in the late 20th century, bishops in various denominations.

The book is a comprehensive, almost encyclopedic narration of historical facts ferreted from church newspapers and newsletters, convention minutes, and the minutes of women?s conventions and auxiliaries, the secular black press and other archival sources. It is a groundbreaking depiction of women?s religious faith and spirituality as it seeks to reveal how ?black women have woven their faith into their daily experience, and illustrates their centrality to the development of African-American religion, politics and public culture.?

Collier-Thomas begins with the 400-plus years of slavery, discusses the critical roles that African-American women played in establishing the ?Invisible Institution? -- the various ?hush and brush? arbors that enabled those enslaved to develop a Christianity that was a blend of African and American cultures, heritages and experiences. She illustrates how enslaved black women were the ?glue that held the family and community together? and the foundation for the formation of the independent black churches.

The book has problems, most attributable to length. It is repetitive; there are odd leaps in time, forward and backward. The work is significant in including black women from predominantly white institutions, but fuller discussion of their own religious organizations, such as the Ladies of St. Peter Claver and St. John -- very similar in their outreach efforts to the Baptist Women?s Convention and the Methodist Missionary Boards -- would have been helpful. The black women?s religious orders are briefly mentioned but little explored in their critical formation roles of the black Catholic community. At the same time, I recognize that fuller development of these issues would have added another 100 pages or so to an already hefty work.

Jesus, Jobs, and Justice has laid a foundation. It has opened the doors to more scholarship on the roles of women of African descent in their particular churches -- as well as in other religions, especially Buddhism and Islam. It is a mine of information for future theses, dissertations and other works on black women?s critical roles in ?uplifting the race.? Best of all, it clearly reveals the truth behind the African-American saying: ?If it wasn?t for the women? where would we be? Where, indeed.

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Source URL (retrieved on *09/04/2015 - 03:02*): http://ncronline.org/books/2012/09/foundation-laid-black-women