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# Spirituality and Culture in Higher Education

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## **Spirituality and Culture in Higher Education**

### **Abstract**

*This session will examine the need for students of color to be active or involved within local Community, both "Faith & Secular." The session will discuss the historical writing of Richard Niebuhr, author of Christ and Culture, who challenged faith groups to discover the role of "faith," [that which now is referenced as "spirituality"], and culture can enhance the maturing process, especially in relationship to Higher Education. The presentations will focus specifically on the role of spirituality and culture relating to students of color in a predominantly Eurocentric environment.*

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This third year of the New Millennium has the Community of Faith celebrating author Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, a most challenging writing published in the 1950s and has much relevancy for the Faith Community in the 21st Century. Professor Niebuhr observes how the "Faith Community" traditionally has believed faith cannot mutually coexist with culture; i.e., the believer must choose between the two. However, Niebuhr suggests the question is not "faith or culture;" rather, "faith and culture."

The role of spirituality and culture in Higher Education as it relates to students of color in predominantly Eurocentric educational environments, is significant even though persons of color have been misled to believe a relationship between the "spirit and the world" should be considered diametrically-opposite of one another. The world, which represents culture, is seen as being demonic possessed, consistently failing, and, of least importance in aiding students of color to be more than mere participants in Higher Education.

A redefining of "spirituality and culture" is needed if dialogue is to occur. The division which rises from the discussion through use of these terms is caused by "traditional interpretations" and "cultural understandings." The challenges facing students of color at predominately Eurocentric Institutions of higher education is how the role of "faith" has traditionally been seen or viewed in a Eurocentric setting as opposed to the student of color's setting, e.g., African American understanding of the role of faith and culture differs significantly from Euro Americans. It is the understanding of "differences" which can result in unification in times of crisis and even more so, on a daily basis.

Niebuhr stresses, and rightfully so, that "faith" and "culture" are actually, compliments of one another. Each has a role to play in unifying humanity, but only with the proper interpretation and acknowledgement of misinterpretation, can unity be a real end result. "Spirituality" in today's society takes on new meaning and purpose. For example, in the celebration of Kwanzaa, the founder, Dr. Maulana Karenga, once stated that Kwanzaa was not a religious event, but today, he confesses Kwanzaa to possess a "spiritual" nature and not just merely cultural. This change of traditional interpretation of such celebrations affirms the need for redefinition of terms before the beginning of healthy dialogue.

**Presenter**

**Larry C. Menyweather-Woods** has been an Instructor, Black Studies Department, at the University of Nebraska at Omaha since 1994. His emphasis of instruction is Black Culture, Afro Religion & Theology, Community Planning, and Introduction to Black Studies. He received a BA in Psychology with honors from St Leo University in Florida and an M.A. in Pre-Doctoral Biblical Studies at the Pittsburg Theological Seminary in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Since 1989 he has served as a Senior Pastor for the Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church in Omaha, Nebraska and from 1991 to 1997 he was a lecturer in the Theology Department of the Black Church in the African American Experience. Mr. Menyweather-Woods is the Founder of MMMBC Development Corporation, INC., and Pisgah, INC. Faith-based, Community Based Organizations involved in Senior Housing an affordable housing development.