

Womanist Theology

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WOMANIST THEOLOGY is a form of reflection that places the religious and moral perspectives of Black women at the center of its method. Issues of class, gender (including sex, sexism, sexuality, and sexual exploitation), and race are seen as *theological* problems. Womanist theology takes old (traditional) religious language and symbols and gives them new (more diverse and complex) meaning. This form of theological reflection cannot be termed “womanist” simply because the subject is Black women’s religious experiences. The key for womanist theology is the use of an inter-structured analysis employing class, gender, and race. This kind of analysis is both descriptive (an analysis and sociohistorical perspective of Black life and Black religious worldviews) and prescriptive (offering suggestions for the eradication of oppression in the lives of African Americans and, by extension, the rest of humanity and creation).

A key feature of womanist theology is its evolving character. From its formal beginning in 1985 with the publication of Katie Geneva Cannon’s article, “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness,” (*Katie’s Canon*, 47-56), it has developed in the following ways: an orientation to Black women’s survival in an oppressive social order that is classist, racist, and sexist; a framework for interpreting and critiquing the role of the Black Church; an interrogation of and critique of the Black Churches’ appropriation of scripture in oppressive ways; a model for Black women’s organizational strength; a critique of Black social stratification; advocacy for justice-based spirituality; the inclusion of ecological concerns; a concern for health care; a consideration of Black sexuality; and the issue of work. Within this evolving character, womanist theology often melds theological and social scientific analysis with cultural studies, literary studies, political economy and often addresses public policy issues affecting African American communities. To date, most womanist theology has been Protestant Christian, although Roman Catholic voices have been

strong from its inception. This is changing as the influence of Santeria, Yoruba, Vodun and other African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Brazilian religions begin to make an impact on womanist theological discourse.

As an intellectual movement, womanist theology addresses the shortcomings of Black Theology and Feminist Theology. Early on, Black Theology demonstrated an unwillingness to deal with sexism and classism. Feminist Theology often reduced the variety of women's experiences to those of White, middle-class women, which, womanist theologians point out, does not address racism or classism. Womanist theology also addresses conscious and unconscious homophobia in theological discourse.

Foundations

Far from being a strictly theoretical enterprise, womanist theology evolved from the life and witness of Black women. The roots of womanist theology span the 256-year period of chattel slavery in the West and the survival and support commitments of Black women during this period including the new racism of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. Womanist theology is not like the character Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who, when asked by her White mistress Miss Ophelia "who are your parents?," responded with "I just growed," but was born in the womb of Black women's experiences and has been cultivated throughout history.

Womanist theology employs materials by and about Black foremothers as resources for contemporary reflection that provide a conscious background for God-talk. Rather than assume the universal claims of traditional theologies, womanist theology acknowledges that all theological reflection is limited by human cultural, social, and historical contexts. These limits are not negative, but merely representative of our humanity. Rather than restrict, these limits can serve as a challenge to explore the particular ways in which any group having similar characteristics (e.g., age, denomination, ethnicity, sexuality) experiences divine activity in life. These differing perspectives need not ultimately separate but can enrich us as we acknowledge the limits of what we know in listening to the voices of others. Ultimately, womanist theology points us to the largeness of God and the various ways in which human beings often seek to confine God.

Many African American women theologians gravitated to the use of Alice Walker's term "womanist" as both a challenge to and a confes-

sional statement for their own work. Walker first used the term in a 1978 short story, "Advancing Luna and Ida B. Wells," eventually published in the 1980 anthology, *Take Back the Night: Women and Pornography* edited by Laura Lederer and in Walker's 1982 collection of short stories, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. In this story, a Black couple struggles with the husband's addiction to pornography. As the wife becomes more radicalized by the Black feminist movement, she gives her husband articles to read that challenge his justifications for his love of pornography. She also signals her unwillingness to ignore his sexual addiction. Walker offers one simple illustrative line that she does not elaborate, "A womanist is a feminist, only more common" (*You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, 41).

Later, Walker reviews Jean Humez's publication of Rebecca Cox Jackson's (1795-1871) writings in *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson*. Jackson was a Black female Shaker eldress who founded a Shaker community with Rebecca Perot, also a Black Shaker. Walker appreciates Humez's editing, but challenges Humez's assessment that Jackson and Perot were a lesbian couple by contemporary standards, although Jackson described herself as dead to sexuality or "lust." Walker challenges a White scholar's decision to assign a label that the Black woman had not chosen for herself and argues that *if* Jackson and Perot were erotically bound, they would have had their own word for it. Walker then uses the word "womanist" to define the diverse ways in which Black women have bonded sexually and nonsexually. She also questions the wisdom, or the appropriateness, of tying Black women's sexuality and culture to the Isle of Lesbos, given that Black women's bonding is more ancient than Greek culture and is not separatist, but seeks liberation for the entire community in an overarching oppressive social order.

Walker has a four-part definition of womanist in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) that contains the organic and concrete elements of tradition, community, spirituality and the self, and critique of White feminist thought. Her definitions provide a fertile ground for religious reflection and practical application.

Womanist: 1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter) and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, xi-xii).

Because Walker's definitions are rich in historical allusions to Black history and Black women's commitment to freedom, womanist theology often begins with an exploration of some key figures and movements found in Black women's experiences. For instance, an allusion to Harriet Tubman (1820-1913) who led more than three hundred slaves out of slavery on "The Underground Railroad" is found in the second part of Walker's definition. Tubman's life is a model of Christian faith, commitment to freedom, wisdom, and humanity during a period when Whites questioned Black people's full humanity. Other exemplars and guides for womanist theology of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries include Jarena Lee (1783-?), Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), Maria Stewart (1803-1879), Julia Foote (1823-1900), and Amanda Berry Smith (1878-1890). Using the genre of spiritual autobiography, Lee challenges women's exclusion from the ordained ministry in the early African Methodist Episcopal Church. Foote discusses the significance of sanctification (the process of achieving salvation) and, as the first woman ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, she offers insights into Methodist women's concepts of salvation and righteousness. Maria Stewart wrote prayers, meditations, and political essays in which she challenged Black Northerners to be active abolitionists and take their political, economic, and, educational situations into their own hands in obedience to God's justice.

Another resource for womanist theology is found in the countless numbers of Black women's clubs formed in the 1800s. The women of the

club movement yoked their religious and social perspectives to address the racial, economic, and sexual exploitations of their day. Most club members were active church workers or at least attended church regularly. Groups and programs evolved out of the needs of the immediate communities, with common themes being education and care for the aged. Sharecroppers, housewives, students, salesgirls, dressmakers, artists, teachers, and school principals came together to form women's clubs for community uplift and support. This activism included establishing night schools, working with prisoners, caring for aged former slaves, creating insurance-type funds for illness benefits, educating Black girls and women, and agitating for the rights of Black womanhood. Members included women such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin (1842-1924, the organizer of the first convention for the women's clubs that led to the creation of the National Association of Colored Women-NACW). A few of the prominent women who were members and leaders of the NACW were Gertrude Mossell (1855-1948, journalist and author), Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964, who was an educator, a "race woman" and a feminist), Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931, journalist and leader of the anti-lynching crusade), and Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954, lecturer and "race woman" who served as a president of the NACW). As exemplars, these women were not perfect. Club women often displayed a measure of elitism concerning class, color, and geographic origin. This same elitism is found in some great Black male figures of their day such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Frederick Douglass. Nevertheless, these shortcomings are instructive warnings for contemporary womanist theology, and their strengths are solid foundations for womanist work.

Novels and short stories also serve as resources for womanist theology. Stretching from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola LeRoy: or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) to contemporary novelists such as Toni Morrison (*Beloved* and *Paradise*), Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), Tina McElroy Ansa (*Baby of the Family*), Gloria Naylor (*Mama Day*) and Edwidge Danticat (*Krick? Krack!*), Black women novelists have written about the religious meaning found in everyday Black lives. For example, the works of Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Mules and Men*, *Moses Man of the Mountain*, and *The Sanctified Church*) blend literary and cultural anthropological insights from Black lives and in the particular worlds of Black women. Authors such as Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*), Pauline Hopkins (*Contending Forces*), Nella Larson (*Quicksand*), and Marita Bonner (*The Purple Flower*) explore themes of slavery, colorism, sexism, and racism.

Representative Contemporary Voices

The term “womanist” is confessional. This means it is a term that cannot be imposed, but must be claimed. This provides an organic undertaking of constant self-reflection in the context of the “doing” of one’s theological reflection. Also, the womanist is not free to name others as womanist if this is not a term they claim for themselves. For example, it is inaccurate to describe Black women from the nineteenth century as womanists. Although many, like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper, employed an interstructured social analysis in their activism, none of these women claimed the term womanist for herself. At best, these women embody a nascent womanism that provides a rich framework for womanists of this era to flesh out in their theologies.

Katie Geneva Cannon was the first woman of African descent ordained by the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) in 1974 and the first Black woman to earn a doctorate from Union Theological Seminary in New York (1983). Cannon was the first to use the term “womanist” in the religious disciplines in her 1985 article, “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness.” Cannon’s article, included in the 1991 anthology edited by Letty M. Russell, *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible* and later in Cannon’s 1996 collection of essays, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, shifts from the use of Black feminist consciousness to Black womanist consciousness as an interpretative principle that addresses oppression, identifies texts that empower—specifically biblical texts—to “dispel the threat of death in order to seize the present life” (*Katie’s Canon*, 56).

Delores S. Williams was the first to use the term “womanist theology” in her 1987 *Christianity and Crisis* article, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices.” Williams, who earned her doctorate from Union Theological Seminary in New York and is a Presbyterian laywoman, uses Walker’s definition of womanism as a theoretical outline for a womanist theology that consists of four elements. The first is a multidialogical intent. This values conversations with people from various religious, political, and social communities. Womanists enter these conversations with the reality of the slow genocide of Black people as their primary focus to maintain their integrity and accountability to Black communities as they engage in these multiple conversations with many dialogue partners. The second element is a liturgical intent in which Black female clergy and scholars develop a theology relevant to the Black Church in its action, thought, and worship. Womanist theology challenges the Black

Church to examine the oppressive messages it gives both consciously and unconsciously to Black peoples. These messages include ageism, classism, colorism, homophobia, racism, sexism, and others. For Williams, the liturgy itself must be infused with and proclaim justice. The third element is didactic intent. This considers teaching and how the Black Church deals with the moral life through a concern for justice, quality of life, and survival. Finally, the fourth element is a commitment to reason and female imagery and metaphorical language when constructing theological statements. An example of this is Williams' term "demonarchy" which she sees as a more relevant concept than patriarchy when looking at the source of Black women's oppression in that it involves both White males' and females' complicity in systems of domination and social control. This last element clearly distinguishes womanist theology from other forms of theological thought. Traditionally, theological language has valued reason over image and metaphor. Williams rejects this hierarchy for a more dynamic and accurate articulation of theological ideas.

Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988) establishes the overarching framework for womanist liberation ethics. She draws on the work of writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston to argue that Black women's literary tradition is the best literary source for understanding Black women's social and religious experiences. Cannon uses an interdisciplinary approach that includes ethics, history, literary studies, and political economy in a systematic analysis of class, race, and sex. Her aim is to show that Black women's moral agency is different than the White male norm (dominant ethics) due to the existence of the triple oppressions of class, race, and sex. In dominant ethics, the freedom of choice is assumed. Cannon argues that no such assumption can be made for those in situations of oppression. By its very nature and dynamic, oppression limits the options of the oppressed so that a desirable norm in dominant ethics such as frugality is a necessary reality for poor Black women. In making this argument, Cannon clearly distinguishes womanist ethics from dominant ethics.

Also in 1988, Hebrew Bible scholar Renita J. Weems, a doctoral graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and an ordained African Methodist Episcopal Church minister, published *Just A Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*. Weems looks at several well known biblical stories that feature women (Hagar and Sarai, Ruth and Naomi, Vashti and Esther, Miriam and her Ethiopian sister-in-law, Jephthah's daughter and the mourning women, Lot's wife and her

daughters, Martha and Mary, the women who followed Jesus, and Elizabeth and Mary) to explore Black women's relationships with themselves and with each other while moving toward a vision of humanity for all. Weems combines womanist biblical criticism with its passion for reclaiming and reconstructing the stories of biblical women and the Black oral tradition, with its gift for dramatic story-telling. Weems' creative reconstructions are not designed to mirror "fact" but to suggest realistic scriptural testimonies to produce womanist midrashes (stories that explain and or amplify the text). These stories enable Weems to explore contemporary reflections on grief, friendship, loyalty, love, obedience, independence, and jealousy.

Systematic theologian Jacquelyn Grant published *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* in 1989 where she explores Jesus as a key figure in Black Christian theological reflection. Grant, a doctoral graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York and an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, echoed the common theme among all Christian womanist theologians when she pointed to the tri-dimensional oppressions of classism, racism, and sexism and the need to use a holistic approach in theological reflection. Grant argues that God and humanity meet through God's direct communication with poor Black women through Jesus and through God's revelation in the Bible. She notes that Black women must receive and interpret God in their own context. Hence, the significance of Christ is his humanity, not his maleness. For Grant, when theology uses Jesus as a symbol and a sanctioner of male or White or economic supremacy, this imprisons Jesus in an elitist, racist, and sexist symbol system that often results in a notion of servanthood that devalues the humanity of Black women and oppressed others. This understanding of servanthood has been used to reinforce obedience and docility in those who are oppressed socioeconomically, thus allowing the privileged to deny the existence of Jesus' real servanthood by changing his poor status into a royal one.

Womanist theology has not emerged without its critics. In 1989, the *Journal for Feminist Studies in Religion* published a round table discussion that was prompted by Cheryl J. Sanders' essay, "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective." Sanders, who earned her Th.D. from Harvard Divinity School and Church of God pastor, suggests that using Walker's definitions as a foundation for normative discourse in theology and ethics may be a gross conceptual error. Responding to Sanders were Katie Cannon, M. Shawn Copeland, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Bell

Hooks, and Emilie M. Townes. This lively exchange explored the issues of defining a womanist perspective in theology and ethics. Also at stake, particularly for each of the respondents, were the dangers of developing too narrow a view of womanist theology so that it ceases to embrace the great diversity of African American life and religious experiences.

A key event of 1989 was the first academic gathering of womanist scholars at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) as the Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society Consultation. This was a one-year project that achieved Group status in 1990. The Womanist Approaches Group exemplifies the interdisciplinary nature of womanist religious thought. The women (and men) who participate in the Group represent the traditional theological disciplines: theology, ethics, pastoral care, Biblical studies, pastoral theology, Church history, liturgics, Christian religious education. Sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, historians, and artists are also discussion partners. The sessions focus on theoretical issues and the practical questions that inform them.

In 1993, four works by Delores Williams, Renita Weems, and Emilie Townes were published. In *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Williams rejects the Exodus model of Black Theology and turns to wilderness imagery as a better representation of Black women's reality. For her, survival and productive quality of life represent the core of womanist theology rather than Black Theology's focus on liberation. Using Hagar and wilderness concepts gives Williams a biblically based Christian model that de-emphasizes male authority and empowers women. In Hagar's story (Genesis 16:1-16; 21:9-21), Williams finds that God acts as a supreme being who offers survival and hope for a productive quality of life for the African slave Hagar and her son Ishmael rather than as a liberating divinity. She broaches the theme of atonement (salvation) which she returns to at the 1993 Reimagining Conference when she was asked, "What is to be our theory of the atonement?" Williams' reply was, "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff. I think we really need to see the sustaining, the sustenance images, the faith that we are to have. The fish and loaves, the candles we are to light, that our light will so shine before people so that we can remember that this message that Jesus brought, I think, is about life, and it's about the only two commandments that Jesus gave; about love." In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams argues that the passion of Jesus represents human defilement and an attack on the divine. Accordingly, she argues that Black women should avoid surrogacy and turn to the ministerial vision God gave Jesus when he was alive that includes right rela-

tions through words, touch, and the destruction of evil. Prayer, compassion, faith, and love replace manifestations of evil. For Williams, this new model of God's activity and revelation in the world allows her to see the Hagar passage as a resource for social, personal, and religious issues such as motherhood, surrogacy (in both pre- and post-Civil War periods), ethnicity (particularly a focus on skin color), and wilderness (as it parallels Hagar's life in the wild) in contemporary Black women's lives

Christian ethicist Emilie M. Townes published two books in 1993. Townes is a graduate of the University of Chicago Divinity School (DMn) and Northwestern University (Ph.D.). She is also an American Baptist clergywoman. The first book, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*, combined the spirituality and activism of the Black women's club movement with the social and moral views of Ida B. Wells Barnett as a role model for the recovery of Black women's tradition because of Wells Barnett's strong commitments to both the church and justice. Townes names five aspects of a womanist Christian ethic in Wells Barnett's social and moral perspectives: authority, obedience, suffering, liberation, and reconciliation. Townes sees that there are two possible moral responses to authority: one that thrives on subjugation and domination or one that reflects community, partnership, and justice.

Also published in 1993, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, was the first of two anthologies of womanist thought edited by Townes that bring together fourteen scholars, clergy, and lay professionals. Writers in this anthology use various disciplines (New Testament studies, sociology, theology, Christian ethics, pastoral care, musicology, and sociology) and Christian denominations to address the question of persistent evil and suffering through an integrated analysis of class, gender and race. The most distinctive feature of this book is that the authors do not construct the question of theodicy (why is there evil in the world) from the traditional theological framework that puts God at the center of the question. Rather, the authors center the question on human activity and our inability to live as full partners with God through more just human relationships. The seventeen contributors to the companion volume, *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation and Transformation* (1995), refuse to allow evil and suffering to have the last word about the nature of humanity and the ways in which the divine works in lives. Applying the same ecumenical and interdisciplinary model as the first volume, the authors of this second anthology use literature, gospel music and spirituals, health care, sexuality, and spirituality to explore hope as it is yoked to salvation and transformation.

Kelly Brown Douglas and Marcia Riggs published books in womanist theology in 1994. Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, a doctoral graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York and an Episcopal priest, believes that womanist theology must be accountable to poor and working class Black women. In *The Black Christ*, Douglas expands Grant's earlier work and argues that Christ is Black because he does have Black skin and Black features given his religious and social location in the biblical world. She also sees that Christ is Black because we meet God as sustainer, liberator, and prophet who challenges and engages Black communities. Further, womanists must teach in churches and community-based organizations as well as in seminaries and other institutions of higher education. In addition, Douglas notes that womanist theology must engage in conversations beyond the academy if it is to stay in touch and remain accountable to church—and community-based women. In doing so, womanist theology must work with church women to affirm their power, to help empower those who need it, and to encourage the articulation of Black women's voices and theological perspectives in the leadership of the Black Church so that the church might grow and change to be more inclusive and responsive. Douglas points to a key feature found in the majority of womanist theologians—a commitment to and participation in the church and community by working with women in these groups, both large and small.

Christian ethicist Marcia Y. Riggs earned her doctorate from Vanderbilt University and is from the African Methodist Episcopal Zion tradition. Her first book, *Awake, Arise, and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* considers the social stratification in Black communities as a moral dilemma. Riggs uses the Black women's club movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as instructive for developing distinct socioreligious models for a contemporary womanist ethical response to the moral dilemma of Black social stratification. She then provides an ethical praxis to address this dilemma by exploring the development of competitive individualism versus intragroup social responsibility in Black communities. Tracing the rise of the contemporary Black middle class sparked by integration in the 1960s, Riggs argues that integration has not had a universally positive effect on Black communities, but has also ushered in Black class division based on a kind individualism and competitiveness that is destructive rather than creative and unifying. Riggs argues for both a functional separatism (making time and space to sort through one's history and options away from other possible dialogue partners) and a mediating ethic that is not based on certainty or

assumed solidarity with all parties who seek more just relationships. Riggs argues for a more realistic assessment of human abilities to stand in solidarity and mutuality with one another and offers a three-part moral vision to achieve this: renunciation, inclusivity, and responsibility. Renunciation is the virtue of giving up one's privilege of difference—be it class, gender, or race. Inclusivity is both a value and obligation in which we cross the lines of difference to struggle for justice. Responsibility is the virtue of linking racial uplift with God's justice.

Several works in womanist theology appeared in 1995, among them were works by Katie Cannon, Diana Hayes, Cheryl Sanders, and Emilie Townes. As a Christian ethicist, Cannon has provided an important ethical model for womanist thought in *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. Cannon adapted feminist ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison's "dance of redemption." This model describes the process of recognizing oppression and forming ethical decisions and moral stances in relation to it. It, like the preceding model, does not have a predetermined entry point and is also nonlinear:

- **Conscientization:** When reality does not fit into what is normative, producing "Cognitive Dissonance"
- **Emancipatory Historiography:** What are the systems/logos that hold the structures of oppression in place?
- **Theological Resources:** How do the theological disciplines as well as one's spiritual community, uphold or liberate the structures of oppression?
- **Norms Clarification:** How do one's values become clearer? To whom is one accountable? "Where do you come down?"
- **Strategic Options:** Brainstorming; How can I use my conscientization, what have I learned? What are the possible consequences of the option I consider?
- **Annunciation and Celebration:** "I can't do this . . . by myself." "Together, remember, name, and celebrate the presence and power that sustains our struggle."
- **Re-reflection/Strategic Action:** The process begins again from the insights and knowledge of the previous struggle, but at a deeper level (*Katie's Canon*, 140).

Cannon has also proposed a womanist model for analysis of narratives or literature. A survey of her thought reveals the following elements of this model and its flexibility—one can enter this model at any point to

engage in womanist analytical reflection. Cannon poses questions and gives directions in this highly dialogical enterprise:

- How does this source portray blackness, darkness and economic justice for non-ruling class people?
- What are women doing in this text? Are women infantilized, pedestalized, idealized, or allowed to be free and independent?
- Identify and define the mode of oppression.
- Locate causal dynamics of pervasive cultural racism and manufactured patriarchy, especially ecclesial clericalization and hierarchization.
- Explore intellectual breadth, conceptual depth and structural linkage of domination and oppression in their domestic and international manifestations.
- Test passage as to whether or not it aids the victims in their struggle to overcome victimization.
- Critique the presuppositions, intellectual concepts, politics, and prejudice of the writer.
- Critically evaluate the primary motives, politics, allegiance of interpreters/reviewers.
- Talk about the revelation of God in this text.
- Identify "spirit helpers," indigenous people who create opportunities of transformation.
- In what ways does this text help African American women clean ourselves of hatred and contempt that surround and permeates our identity as women in this society.
- Refuse to trim the contours of your "hermeneutic of suspicion."
- Give particular care not to generate monolithic assumptions.
- Examine the living laboratories that expose the actual historical events and contradictions in which people are engaged as moral agents.

Roman Catholic theologian Diana Hayes earned her doctoral degrees at the Catholic University of Louvain in Leuven, Belgium. Her *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World* features the text of the 1995 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality, sponsored by the Center for Spirituality at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. Hayes uses the lives and stories of Harriet Tubman, Zora Neale Hurston, and Hagar to call upon Black women to avoid defining themselves by societal stereotypes. She challenges African American women to listen to the

Spirit within themselves and utilize their creativity, intellects and talents to find their own voice. Hayes explains that "mothering" African-American women are those who maintain nurturing traditions that reveal how their culture evolved; those grandmothers, aunts, mothers and older sisters form a community of women that sustains the spirit within it.

Ethicist Cheryl Sanders edited *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology*. Arguably, womanism and Afrocentrism are the two most influential currents in contemporary African American culture. Both heighten Black cultural self-awareness while deepening knowledge of cultural historical sources. As womanism probes the religious wisdom of African American women for Christian theology, Afrocentricity excavates an African past to liberate the oppressed from Eurocentric world-views through a predominantly male lens. The authors in this important interdisciplinary volume investigate the compatibility of womanist theology and Afrocentricity given the latter's mostly male voice. The authors consider the Afrocentric idea and explore the intricate relationship between afrocentric and womanist perspectives in their lives and commitments.

In *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*, Townes asserts that womanist spirituality grows out of individual and communal reflection on African American faith and life. In this book, she argues for a distinction between spiritual practices and spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, meditation, fasting) and spirituality. For her, womanist spirituality "is not grounded in the notion that spirituality is a force, a practice separate from whom we are moment by moment. It is the deep kneading of humanity and divinity in one breath, one hope, one vision." Using Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Townes explores issues of environmental racism, gender and sexuality, and identity and colorism (the color caste system). In doing so, she argues that womanist spirituality is both a style of living and a style of witness that seeks to cross the yawning chasm of, hatred and prejudice, and oppression into a deeper and richer love of God as one experiences Jesus in life. Further, as an embodied, personal, and communal spirituality, it is a social witness that speaks to issues of survival, social activism, self-worth, and self-esteem.

Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care by Townes appeared in 1998. This is a contextual look at Black health and health care through the framework of a biblical lament modeled after the book of Joel and the traditional womanist concern for class, gender, and race. Townes integrates the debate on health

and health care from the perspective of social ethics (a focus on structures and systems and how the individual and groups respond and shape them) with an ethic of care (a focus on relationships between individuals and groups) concerned about health and health care, lament, and hope. Based on her understanding that health is more than the absence of disease (it involves our biological, emotional, and spiritual well-being), Townes sees health as a cultural production—that health and illness are social constructs dependent on social networks, biology, environment, and individual choice. Health is embedded in our social realities and is the integration of spiritual, mental, and physical aspects of our lives. This interdisciplinary work draws on Christian social ethics, biblical hermeneutics, philosophical ethics, social history, public health, and sociology.

Karen Baker-Fletcher's *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Spirit* also appeared in 1998. Baker-Fletcher has a doctorate in theology from Harvard University and is an American Baptist clergywoman. Building on the theme of voice she explored in her first book, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (1994), this is the first book-length examination of eco-feminism in womanist theology. Baker-Fletcher yokes reflection on her own journey with keen insights into environmental racism to develop a constructive religious vision that recovers and renews the strong, historic tie of Black and Native peoples to the land. Baker-Fletcher's book explores a justice-oriented spirituality of creation that evokes a strong sense of God in nature. Using the concept of "wordings" (writings or talk that comes from the heart, the spirit, the bodily experience of daily life), Baker-Fletcher evokes the lyrical nature of spirituality as she works with both biblical and literary metaphors of dust and spirit to address the embodiment of God, Spirit, Christ, creation, and humans.

An important essay by Linda E. Thomas also appeared in 1998. Thomas earned her Doctor of Philosophy degree from American University in cultural and social anthropology and is also a United Methodist clergywoman. In her 1998 article, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm" in *Cross Currents*, Thomas notes that the method of womanist theology "validates the past lives of enslaved African women by remembering, affirming, and glorifying their contributions" (www.crosscurrents.org/thomas.htm). Thomas argues for the inclusion of ethnography in womanist theology in echoing Douglas' call to place the lives of ordinary Black women at the center of womanist work. For Thomas, ethnographic approaches allow womanist

theologians to enter the actual communities of poor Black women to “discover pieces to create a narrative for the present and the future” (www.crosscurrents.org/thomas.htm).

In 1999, Kelly Brown Douglas published *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. This is the first book-length investigation of Black sexuality in both the Black Church and the Black community. Douglas argues that treating sexuality as taboo has interfered with constructive responses to HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, homophobia, unhealthy male and female relationships, and rendered Black and womanist theologians largely mute on sexual issues. Douglas has three purposes in this work: (1) to understand why sexuality has been a taboo subject for the Black Church and community; (2) to advance a discourse on Black sexuality; and (3) to promote theological discourse and analyses that will nurture healthier attitudes and behaviors toward sexuality within the Black Church and community context. Of particular concern for her, are homophobia and heterosexism. She seeks to provoke Black men and women to enjoy the fullness of their humanity. She also returns to a theme found in *The Black Christ* in that she wants womanist theology to be “accountable to ‘ordinary’ Black people as they struggle through life to ‘make do and do better’” (*Sexuality and the Black Church*, 8).

Future Trajectories

Other important contributors to the development of womanist theology include theologian Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan (*Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*, 1997), theologian Joanne M. Terrell (*Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African-American Experience*, 1998), Christian ethicist Joan M. Martin (*More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women*, 2000), and sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (*If It Wasn't for the Women . . . : Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*, 2001). There is no one voice in womanist theology, but a symphony that at times may move to a creative cacophony. There is on-going discussion about how womanist scholars engage the four-part definition of womanist proposed by Alice Walker. Some womanist theologians challenge Walker's inclusion of homosexuality in the second definition of womanist as a desirable norm in the African American community. Others resonate with her theme of the mother-daughter dialogue in the first of Walker's definition and see this as pivotal for their work. Still others are drawn to explore the dimensions

of self-care, self-love, and affirmation given by Walker. Some focus on the need for a piercing critique of White feminism (academic and practical). Finally, there are those who believe all four of the parts of Walker's definition must determine one's theoretical and analytical framework.

As womanist theology moves from its largely Protestant and Christian base, it ushers in conversations with African based religions from African countries, the Caribbean, and within the United States. It is also sparking discussions with other women of the African diaspora from Brazil, the Caribbean, and the Netherlands. These conversations are in their initial stages and bode well for future womanist theological reflection. If womanist theology is to continue its evolving, yet contextual, nature, it must continue to question and push beyond its present boundaries to engage in these wider conversations and also maintain its ongoing conversation with Black Christian churches and communities in the United States. This conversation includes advocacy for full partnership between men and women, the care and nurture of children, respect for the dignity and wisdom for the elderly, a prophetic witness within Christianity, and a relentless insistence that the church universal and its theological principles reflect a spirit of justice and love for all humanity and the rest of creation.

Sources¹

Womanist theology has its beginnings in the four-part definition of womanist by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Four foundational texts for womanist theology are Katie Geneva Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988) and *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (1996), Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (1989), and Delores S. Williams's *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993).

Books by Marcia Y. Riggs, *Awake, Arise, and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (1994), and Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999) address Walker's appeal to the diversity of Black life in the United States. Renita J. Weems, *I Asked for*

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Intimacy: Stories of Blessings, Betrayals, and Birthings (1993) and Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (1998) explore the themes of self-love and self respect found in Walker's definition of womanist.

The authors in the two anthologies edited by Emilie M. Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (1993) and *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (1996) breathe new life into the traditional theological concepts of theodicy, salvation, and hope.



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