DEVELOPMENT OF WOMANIST THEOLOGY: SOME CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS

RUFUS BURROW, JR.

INTRODUCTION

Womanist theology is the most creative development and has been the most significant contribution to black theology and black religious scholarship since its emergence in the mid-1980s. Proponents of this new way of thinking about and doing theology are primarily Afrikan American women who have put black religion on trial in a way heretofore unknown. Although influenced by both black theology and feminist theology, womanist theology is not a mere constellation of ideas from these camps. Instead, Womanists have focused first and foremost on their own experience and voice as they continue to clarify just what they mean to say and do as theologians whose reality is multidimensional. That is, they are women, Afrikan American, who believe they are frequently adversely affected by classism, colorism, and heterosexism.

This essay focuses on three things. First, I discuss contributions of the folklorist, anthropologist, and novelist Zora Neale Hurston to womanist theology and ethics. Second, attention is given the reasons black women religious scholars were initially critical of their male counterparts, and why they now prefer womanist theology as the best way of describing their work. Third, I discuss six important characteristics of womanist theology and ethics. I conclude with a consideration of several limitations or concerns about the womanist theological project. The hope is that these will soon come to center stage in womanist theology and ethics. Indeed, in light of the seriousness of the genocidal tendency reflected in intracommunity violence and murder among large numbers of young Afrikan-American males, they must. For womanist theology as we will see is, among other things, a survival theology. Therefore it must focus on issues like this in a way and to an extent that neither it nor black theology has to date.

Rufus Burrow, Jr. is an associate professor of church and society at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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The roots of womanist thought, especially the idea of the strong, responsible, self-determined, in-charge black woman actually antedates American slavery. Influenced by the work of Cheikh Anta Diop, historian John Henrik Clarke observes that Afrikan women in antiquity frequently “ruled nations with unquestionable authority.” Because of their own level of security many Afrikan men saw no need to be threatened by the advance of women “as far as their talent, royal lineage and prerogatives would take them.” In addition, “the women of Ethiopia had rights equal to that of men, and equal power. Ethiopia was the first country in the world to have been ruled by a Queen.” Barbara Omolade reminds us that prior to American slavery West Afrikan women “enjoyed high status, and the civil and human rights accorded all tribal members.” These women participated in their societies as full persons and were accorded the same human and other rights as men. So deeply did they cherish their humanity and the rights accorded them that “from the beginning African women as well as men independently and collectively resisted enslavement.”

Black women religious scholars such as Jacquelyn Grant, Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, Karen Baker-Fletcher, Diana Hayes, Annie Ruth Powell, Marcia Riggs, Carroll A.W. Ali, Delores Carpenter, Emilie Townes, and Kelly Delaine Brown Douglas have adopted and adapted Alice Walker’s term womanist as the best way of characterizing their work in teaching and ministry. Cheryl Sanders contends that there is a strong spirituality element in all the womanist writings, and that “arguably it is the spiritual appeal of the womanist concept that has caused so many black women thinkers to anchor their scholarly identity within the womanist nomenclature.”

Womanists have primarily focused on black women’s experience of racism, sexism, misogyny, and economic exploitation during and after American slavery. As Alice Walker pointed out, women in the womanist tradition have generally been very mentally-emotionally strong, self-determined, sassy, survivalists, lovers of women and women’s experience, as well as lovers of and caregivers to the black community. They have generally exhibited the trait of being in charge.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, WOMANIST THEOLOGIANS AND ETHICISTS

Katie Cannon was the first womanist theologian to publish a book on the subject. In her seminal text, Black Womanist Ethics (1988), Cannon found the above named traits to be those which best characterized the anthropologist, folklorist, and novelist Zora Neale Hurston (1903-1960). Hurston’s work has had a strong influence on both Cannon and Alice Walker. Since Cannon believes that important clues to understanding black women’s experience are found in the literary tradition of black women, it is not surprising that she and most other womanist theologians and ethicists have been influenced by one or more key writers in this tradition. For example, Karen Baker-Fletcher has been much influenced by Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), while Emilie M. Townes’ has been influenced by Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931). Marcia Riggs has examined the work and influence of more than a half dozen nineteenth-century black foremothers in the womanist tradition.

Zora Neale Hurston grew up in the rural town of Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black town to be incorporated. Her writings celebrate the culture of that area. Womanist characteristics were actually passed on to Hurston by her mother, Lucy Ann Potts. A school
teacher, Potts taught Hurston to always reach for the stars, i.e., to always aim high. Reflecting on what her mother taught her, Hurston said: "We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground..."

Hurston was taught by her mother to strive toward the continued enhancement of her own individuality and sense of self, despite the fact that they lived in the deep South at a time when Blacks had always to remember their place and to defer to Whites. In addition, black women were always expected to defer to men (of all races). What Hurston's mother taught her was quite revolutionary for that period.

Although her father, a Baptist preacher and the mayor of their town, strongly encouraged her to abide by the ethics of the white South, Hurston's mother persisted until her dying day in efforts to teach her to be self-sufficient, self-determined, her own person, and her own thinker. In Jonah's Gourd Vine Hurston rehearsed portions of her mother's deathbed speech in the fictional character of Lucy.

Stop cryin', Isie, you can't hear whut Ahm sayin', 'member tuh git all de education you kin. Dat's de onliest way you kin keep out from under people's feet. You always strain tuh be de bell cow, never be de tail uh nothin'. Do de best you kin, honey, 'cause neither yo' paw or dese older chillun is ginn tuh be bothered too much wid youh, but you ginn' tuh git 'long. Mark mah words. You got spunk, but mah po' lil sandy-haired child ginn' suffer uh lot 'fo she git tu de place she can fend fuh herself. And Isie, honey, stop cryin' and lissen tuh me. Don't you love nobody better'n you do yo'self. Do, you'll be killed 'thout being struck uh blow. Some uh dese things Ahm tellin' yuh, you won't understand 'em fuh years tuh come, but de time will come when you'll know..." (my emphasis)

Hurston was encouraged to love and respect herself, to stand tall, and to take charge of her life. Her mother urged her to be a survivor and to seek wholeness of self even in the face of near unbearable suffering, abuse and disregard for her personhood.

Essentially on her own from the age of nine and then a runaway at age fourteen, Hurston learned early what it meant to survive, to be self-determined, and fortitudinous. She developed what Alice Walker called "unctuousness," the ability, the willingness, and the audacity to affirm her personhood and dignity in the face of incredible odds and persecution. Katie Cannon saw in this idea an important and necessary principle for the formation of womanist ethics.

What Hurston makes clear is that it is the quality of steadfastness, akin to fortitude, in the face of formidable oppression that serves as the most conspicuous feature in the construction of Black women's ethics.... Hurston portrays this moral quality of "unctuousness" of life not as an ideal to be fulfilled but as a balance of complexities so that suffering will not overwhelm and endurance is possible.... Creatively straining against the external restraints in one's life is virtuous living.

If one is Black and a woman she has always to be self-determined in the face of the odds, no matter how impossible it seems to overcome them. The "unctuousness" of Hurston meant that she was committed to pushing beyond all externally imposed limits every
moment of her life to stamp out all things that seek to demean both her and her people. In a sense, Afrikan Americans have no choice but to be unctuous as long as racism, economic exploitation, sexism, colorism, black on black violence and murder, etc., converge to destroy them.

Much of Katie Cannon's writings on womanist ethics and her stance on moral agency is based on moral wisdom gleaned from her study of Hurston. Indeed, as noted above, many present-day womanist thinkers have been influenced by the writings, experiences, and activism of strong, self-determined nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Afrikan American women. So important to womanists is the literary and other work of these women that Cannon maintains that 'there is no better source for comprehending the 'real lived' texture of Black experience and the meaning of the moral life in the Black context than the Black woman's literary tradition. Black women's literature offers the sharpest available view of the Black community's soul.' Although some may argue that Cannon states her case too strongly, we should remember that it is only in recent years that sustained attention has been given Afrikan-American women's experiences. Cannon's emphasis goes a long way toward reminding us of the lack of balance in the treatment of black women's contributions at a time when black men were the dominant black writers. Therefore what may seem like an overemphasis on Cannon's part regarding the significance of the black women's literary tradition actually helps to create balance, where previously there was none.

In any case, black women writers, in contradistinction to black male writers, have frequently tended to focus more on the black community and what happens there, rather than on its troubles and conflicts with outside forces. Black women writers, unlike their male counterparts, tend to be more concerned about uncovering the aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual values of the black community. They are less concerned about comparing these with the moral standards of the white community. Instead, their focus tends to be on rediscovering the values that have brought Afrikan Americans thus far on the journey. Black women writers emphasize what Afrikan Americans can become quite apart from values developed in the white community. In addition, black women writers stress—in a way that no other writers do—the need for black women to affirm, protect, and enhance their own sense of self and dignity, much like Zora Neale Hurston did. In addition, they search for and portray value consciousness in the black community. In this respect black women writers tend to be race persons, inasmuch as their focus is on rediscovering the positives of African American experience and culture and teaching these to the black community. This is knowledge that the entire African American community needs if it would survive toward liberation and wholeness.

Furthermore, black women writers have long understood the need to pass on historic life-saving values such as respect for self, family, the elderly, the community, spiritual values, the importance of working cooperatively to overcome problems, giving back to the community, and the value of hard work. For example, in Alice Walker's novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland, we find the chief protagonist in the story doing this for his granddaughter, Ruth. He passed on to her the best of the moral wisdom of his people in the hope that she would some day know the freedom that neither he nor her father had known. Copeland counseled his granddaughter on what she would need to do in order
Jacquelyn Grant observes that the misinformed have often labeled black women who exhibit womanist characteristics as being “domineering castrating matriarchs,” which erroneously implies possession of tremendous power and decision making both inside and outside black families. Womanists do not equate the traits of womanism with “domineering castrating matriarchs.” To be strong-willed, self-determined, one who talks back, and highly intelligent does not in itself make a black woman domineering, despite others’ perceptions—especially men’s.

Alice Walker contends that the womanist is, minimally, a black feminist. But maximally she is much more. For “feminist,” emerging from white women’s experience and culture, does not adequately capture black women’s experiences, struggles, and that “unctuousness” they have always exhibited. The term womanist clearly distinguishes between white and black women’s experiences in a way that “feminist” does not. Womanist theology, for example, highlights the differences between the way black and white women think about and do theology. The womanist is one who is always active both in the struggle to overcome all forms of oppression affecting black women, as well as those forms of oppression which dehumanize other members of humanity. What it finally comes down to is that “womanist just means being and acting out who you are.” And this does not necessarily make one a domineering castrating matriarch.

**Point of Departure of Womanist Thought**

The point of departure of womanist theology is black women’s experiences in the black community, black churches, and throughout society. In addition, womanist theology urges that black women listen to and be inspired more by their own voices and experiences of the Christian faith than anything said or decided by men. Womanist theology opens the door for black women to do theology out of their tridimensional experience of racism, sexism, and classism. Each of these must be taken into consideration, for each is a crucial aspect of African-American women’s reality and experience. “To ignore any aspect of this experience is to deny the holistic and integrated reality of Black womanhood.”

Womanists, then, do not feel compelled to say that they are any one of these any more or less than the others. For womanists the question: “Are you black first and then a woman?” is at best a ridiculous one and does not take seriously their total reality as human beings who experience themselves always and at once as African American and woman. Many black women are in tune with the fact that they are oppressed because they are women and because they are Blacks of African descent. Black women who happen also to be poor are quite aware that they are disregarded and trampled upon because of their class status too. Indeed, if her sexual orientation is different from the traditional, womanist theology affirms that she also suffers from the evil of heterosexism. This means hers can be a quadruple and even a quintuple-dimensional oppression if colorism is included.

Womanist theology is a universalist theology in that its proponents address and analyze all forms of oppression, for all of these demean and degrade persons. Any practice that dehumanizes others separates and alienates persons from each other. Womanists, on the other hand, see and live by the conviction that there is a fundamental connectivity or interdependence among persons. Therefore, womanist theology is “not content with a lib-
eration that addresses only a particular person's or group's wholeness. Instead, womanist theology provides a sharp critique of the racism of white women and their failure to acknowledge and take seriously black women's experiences. It critiques the racism of white women and men as well as the sexism of all men. Womanist theology also challenges what it views as the heterosexism of representatives of all human groups. In addition, it contends against the male hatred and abuse of women in general, and black women in particular.

**MISOGYNISTIC TREATMENT OF WOMEN**

In the first years of its existence womanist theologians were acutely critical of the failure of black male liberation theologians to see and acknowledge black women and to include them in the dialogues on black theology. By excluding black women and making them invisible in their theology, black male liberation theologians did not feel compelled to address black males' misogyny and abusive treatment of black women. No person spoke to the issue of black male hatred and abuse of black women like the late Audre Lorde (1934-1992). She made it clear that no longer would black women accept the hateful and abusive treatment of their black male companions in silence. The silence was, ostensibly, for the purpose of not airing dirty laundry in public, and also in order to show political solidarity with black men. And yet the eerie silence has frequently meant a kind of hear no evil, see no evil, do nothing about evil, stance. It has often meant a passive acceptance in the black community of the abuse and misogynistic treatment of black women. For efforts are not frequently made to correct such practices. Lorde and growing numbers of black women have found this approach totally unacceptable, and therefore reject the practice of black women silently enduring such treatment in their own community and homes. No longer is political (or any other kind of) solidarity with black men worth misogynistic and abusive treatment and passively suffering in silence.

Black feminists and womanists know that what the white woman protagonist, Arvay, experienced in Hurston's novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), was not an isolated occurrence in either the white or the black community. Although a self-determined woman, Arvay is time and again the victim of spousal abuse, even though her husband never struck her, and always insisted that he loved her. Yet he controlled her and abused her psychologically. It is important to note that womanists do not accept the older view that violence has taken place only when a woman is physically abused and when one can actually see blood, swelling, and bruises on her body. Rather, womanists define violence in broader terms to include any act which violates or demeans the personhood of a woman, indeed of any person! By definition, then, even verbal abuse is a form of violence.

In addition to psychologically and emotionally abusing her, Arvay's husband, Jim Meserve, did not hesitate to let her know that she had no mind of her own, could not think for herself, and needed him precisely because of her inability (as a woman!) to take care of herself. And of course, if women have no mind of their own they have no way of properly guiding their will, and thus are incapable of responsible moral behavior. For moral behavior presupposes both freedom of will and mature intellect to guide the will to responsible moral choice. Indeed, Jim assumed that women need men in order to keep them from hurting themselves. On this view women are seen as completely mindless objects
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whose sole purpose for being is to serve men. Thus when Arvay insisted that even if she did love him she would have to think about whether to marry him, and that she would have to make up her own mind, Jim responded chauvinistically:

_Women folks don't have no mind to make up nohow. They wasn't made for that. Lady folks were just made to laugh and act loving and kind and have a good man to do for them all he's able, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he'd like to have, and make him so happy that he's willing to work and fetch in every dad-blamed thing that his wife thinks she would like to have. That's what women are made for._

(my emphasis)

Presumably the woman is capable of doing little else than spreading her legs at the man's beck and call and bearing, not children as such, but "as many boy-children as he figgers he'd like to have." Since she cannot think she knows not what else to do. But she need not worry about caring for herself. The man will do that for her too! For apart from child-bearing she is, after all, helpless.

It is instructive to note here that while still engaged to Arvay, Jim was advised by Joe Kelsey (his "pet Negro") to force her to submit to his will as a way of ensuring her obedience. The solution was to take her sexually and give her a good beating, and not necessarily in that order. "'Most women folks will love you plenty if you take and see to it that they do,' Joe told Jim. 'Make'em knuckle under. From the very first jump, get the bridle in they mouth and ride'em hard and stop'em short. They's all alike, Boss. Take'em and break'em.'" Jim thought long and hard about this advice. Not long afterward he raped Arvay. This act of violence may or may not have been influenced by Joe's advice to Jim. But what is important to note is that neither of these men—white or black—was troubled by such degrading, abusive, and violent treatment of women. And at least in this regard we see an instance in which white and black men are actually able to unite—against women!

The point of this discussion is not to suggest that these are attitudes and practices that are unique to any particular race of men, nor that all men engage in such abuses. And yet it should be clear that these misogynistic attitudes and abusive practices against women have been documented in virtually every community where there are men and women. It does not matter that many men—and some women—pretend that such behavior does not occur in their community and home. The point is that too many women have testified to the contrary. Womanists vow not to take such abuse any longer—at least not without resistance.

**Six Characteristics of Womanist Theology**

As observed above, Katie Cannon was the first black woman religious scholar to appropriate Alice Walker's term _womanist_ for the theological project of Afrikan-American women. In a 1985 essay Cannon wrote:

Black feminist consciousness may be more accurately identified as Black womanist consciousness, to use Alice Walker's concept and definition. As an interpretive principle, the Black womanist tradition provides the incentive to chip away at oppres-
The Black womanist identifies with those biblical characters who hold on to life in the face of formidable oppression. Often compelled to act or to refrain from acting in accordance with the powers and principalities of the external world, Black womanists search the Scriptures to learn how to dispel the threat of death in order to seize the present life.29

In 1986 Jacquelyn Grant talked about the significance of "womanist" as the best way of characterizing the theology of black feminist theologians. For Grant the term stresses, among other things, the autonomy of black women. It "means being and acting out who you are and interpreting the reality for yourself. In other words, Black women speak out for themselves."30 By the mid-1980s, black feminist theologians were beginning to appropriate the term "womanist" as the best way of characterizing their work.

In an insightful article Kelly Delaine Brown Douglas explains what womanist theology meant at the time of its appearance in the mid-1980s. Brown Douglas emphasizes that since it is still in the early phase of its formation, with many contributions still to be made by black women, the defining and refining of womanist theology continues. Brown Douglas names four important characteristics. But there are at least two other important traits implied in womanist thought which I believe should be highlighted as well.

**A Theology of Survival**

Womanist theology is a theology of survival. This idea is consistent not only with Walker's definition of womanist, but with the experiences and legacies of nineteenth-century black foremothers. Black women in every era of this country's history have, as a rule, understood the necessity of doing whatever is necessary to protect and defend both themselves and black families, and thus the black community. Historically the black woman was thought of as a chief protector and defender of the black family.31 Womanist theology "gives special attention to Black women’s day-to-day efforts to preserve Black life in a society that tends to devalue this life."32 Accordingly, black women are considered the primary caregivers in black families and are the ones most likely to transmit to black children the most important values and cultural practices of people of African descent. Part and parcel to the idea of womanist theology as a survival theology is the view of God as creator, protector, and "sustainer" of Black (and other) people. To convey this idea womanist theologians use the testimonies of black women and the biblical witness in order to discern the role and place of survivability.33 In a way no black male liberation theologian did Delores Williams emphasizes the survival theme in her book, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993). Historically black women have found ways for themselves and their families to survive in the face of incredibly difficult conditions. Williams could see that it is premature to talk about black liberation until black survivability is guaranteed. Indeed, survival and liberation go hand in hand. Each depends on the other.

**A Liberation Theology**

Secondly, womanist theology, like the black theology of black male theologians, is a lib-
It is not identical with black theology, however, for it is not being forged primarily by black men, but by black women. However, it is similar to black theology in that it has both a political and a theological component. That is, on the one hand womanist theology is concerned about power issues involved in relations between women and men and the dehumanizing ways these get played out at the expense of Afrikan-American women, who suffer all forms of abuse, exploitation, and oppression. Therefore, any theology developed by Afrikan-American women must necessarily be concerned with issues of power. This partially describes the political component of womanist theology, inasmuch as it names, analyzes, criticizes, and seeks means to eradicate the systematic mistreatment and devaluing of black women. In this sense womanist theology is also political and prophetic theology.

On the other hand, and not unrelated to the political component, womanist theology has a theological side. Indeed, it stresses the unity and wholeness of persons and other life forms, recognizing that there is one Creator-God who creates and sustains all life. It also emphasizes God's fundamental and infinite love and care for all persons—women and men. Womanist theology holds that since God willingly and lovingly creates and sustains all persons, any group that oppresses and demeans another is involved in sin. In addition, such behavior is offensive to God and diminishes even the perpetrators since all are interdependent or connected, and ultimately related to each through God.

This theological component of womanist theology is very important and suggestive. For the focus on the unity and interrelatedness of persons and God, as well as the emphasis on survival-liberation makes womanist theology akin to personalism in both its metaphysical and ethical senses. This, even though womanists have not used the term personalism in their work. Metaphysical personalism stresses not only the unity of the ultimately real (or God) but the unity and interrelatedness of persons and the need for a being like the God of Jesus Christ as the chief unifying agent. Ethical personalism focuses on the inherent dignity of all persons, while grounding it in the idea of a personal God who loves and sustains persons and other life forms. This emphasis on human dignity necessarily implies the survival-liberation motif in womanist theology. For if to be a person is to be of inestimable worth, then everything humanly possible ought always be done to insure both the survival and the maximum enhancement and liberation of every human life. That womanists initially focus on the survival-liberation of black women because of their historic condition of multiple-dimensional oppression does not preclude the more universal emphasis on the humanity and dignity of all persons everywhere. Although there are strong theocentric and christocentric elements in womanist theology, one should not underestimate the significance of the anthropocentric element. Womanist theology is concerned with the plight and wellbeing of persons in the world, and most especially is it concerned about black women and the Afrikan-American community.

A GLOBAL THEOLOGY

Thirdly, we learn from Brown Douglas' essay that womanist theology is a global theology. Because it sees a basic community or interconnectedness at the seat of reality, womanists maintain that anything that happens anywhere in the world affects—directly or indirectly—what happens everywhere. Therefore, the oppression of any group anywhere in
the world affects all other groups. This essentially means that the oppression of any group is the oppression of all groups. It also means that the group that oppresses another diminishes itself as well, since it acts contrary to moral law and what God expects of persons in the world. To intentionally demean and undermine the lives of others is to automatically demean one’s own life. In this regard too, womanist theology is essentially personalistic, inasmuch as it affirms the interconnectedness of all persons. Indeed, personalism holds that reality is a society of intercommunicating and interacting persons with the Creator-God at the center.36 Most specifically, womanist theology affirms that Afrikan Americans “are a part of a global community of oppressed peoples struggling for survival and freedom. It seeks to foster dialogue with other theologians of liberation, especially with women of color.”37 Therefore, not only are persons in general interrelated by virtue of the way God creates human beings, but groups who suffer from systematic forms of oppression are especially linked together. Because persons are thought to be connected with each other and with God, an offense against any person is also an offense against God.

A Church Theology

Fourthly, womanist theology is “a church theology,” inasmuch as it emerged from within the context of Afrikan-American women’s religious and other experiences. Historically and presently Afrikan-American women have been the glue that has held the black church together. “Womanist theology affirms the involvement of women in the entire mission and ministry of the church.”38 This despite the fact that black churchwomen have frequently been denied the position of pastor and other leadership roles in the church. They fill the pews and the offering plates. They are the ushers, cooks, and Sunday school teachers. But the pulpit is reserved for the men. Although Brown Douglas maintains that womanist theologians open themselves to being accountable to black women in the pews who fight daily in the trenches of ministry, I wonder about this claim in light of one of the limitations of black liberation theology.

A major internal critique that some first generation black theologians made of black theology is that it failed to really connect with and influence a broad segment of black pastors, laity, as well as non-churchgoers. J. DeOta Roberts is one of the staunchest critics in this regard.39 C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, as well as the late Robert Hood, call attention to this. James H. Harris, a pastor-scholar, also cites this limitation and proposes ways to bridge the gap.40 And of course this raises the question of who black liberation theologians are really accountable to (besides the God of Jesus Christ), since their primary audience, viz., the black community and its churches, is not responding to them in ways which indicate they even know who are the chief representatives of black theology. Nor do very many seem to know what black theology is and what it seeks to say and do.

I raise this issue in light of Brown Douglas’ claim that womanist theologians are accountable to black church women. In my own experience in black churches I have not met significant numbers of black churchwomen who have heard of womanist theology, nor of its chief proponents. Many of those who have heard about it do not know what it is. This may have something to do with the types of churches I have attended, although many well-educated, middle class, Afrikan American church women know little or nothing of either black theology or womanist theology. Yet many of them become very curious and
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excited when they hear the term womanist theology. This suggests an openness and willingness on their part to learn more about it if someone with the knowledge would join in learning experiences with them. In any event, I would say that this is a matter that requires the close attention of womanist theologians and ethicists, lest they too become susceptible to the criticism some black theologians have made of the black theology movement and its actual relationship to black churches and the black community.

The next two characteristics of womanist theology are not named and discussed in Brown Douglas’ informative essay. The foregoing discussion has implied each of them, but I want now to discuss both more explicitly. As with the four traits introduced by Brown Douglas I think that an entire essay can be written on each of these, since there are numerous implications of each for actually doing the day to day trench-work of womanist theology and ethics.

A PROPHETIC THEOLOGY

Although Brown Douglas did not make explicit reference to it in her article, one cannot read the fast developing literature on womanist theology and ethics without being impressed with its emphasis on themes of the eighth-century prophetic tradition, e.g., calling persons back to covenant relationship with God and doing justice and righteousness in God’s world. The prophetic tradition also emphasizes God’s steadfast love and concern for persons, as well as God’s persistent turning toward and searching for persons in the hope that they might be saved from destruction. Abraham Joshua Heschel aptly termed this divine turning toward persons anthropotropism. Therefore a fifth major characteristic of womanist theology is that it is a prophetic theology. In this regard it continues the traditions of eighth-century prophecy, liberation theology in general, and African-American theology in particular. Womanist theology transcends these in its emphasis on being intentional about discovering, resurrecting, and unmuting the voices of African-American women. Only in this way can womanist theologians uphold the eighth-century prophetic tradition. Womanist theology seeks to give voice to voiceless black women, or as Anna Julia Cooper said, to unleash that “singing something” within the black woman.

Womanist theology, then, is “cutting-edge” theology. Its focus on the dignity of persons causes it to be concerned about the eradication of all forms of oppression, and the establishment of liberation and empowerment. Cutting-edge theology is always based on strong prophetic voices which criticize injustice, while advocating justice and righteousness. For justice must be done in a Christ-like spirit and attitude. Thus the need to do justice in a spirit of righteousness and respect for those being treated unjustly. This is consistent with eighth-century prophecy, as the prophets seldom spoke of justice without also speaking of righteousness. God’s concern through the prophets was not simply that justice be done, but that it be done in ways that acknowledge and affirm the inviolable dignity of persons.

Although she would agree that there are many black women who have upheld this tradition, Emilie M. Townes names the nineteenth-century Christian social activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett as “a cutting-edge person” who “had a strong and willful prophetic voice on behalf of the injustices she saw heaped on Black folk in the United States.” Wells-Barnett fought almost single handedly against the systematic Lynchings of black men in the latter and early part of the nineteenth and twentieth century, respectively. In addition, Marcia
Riggs has edited Can I Get A Witness?: Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women, a volume which highlights a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Afrikan-American women for whom the prophetic tradition of the church is (or was) the pivot of their work.

The prophetic voice is characterized by a sense of one's call; the ability to discern God's will and word of truth for the people; the courage to name and expose unjust and oppressive conditions in society; a strong spirit of self-determination which makes one a moral agent who will neither passively accept wrongdoing nor fail to criticize it; the necessity to confront both injustice and the culprits; and the need to break down divisions and create communities of faith, justice, and unity. The prophetic voice is also characterized by a clear affirmation of the absolute dignity and sanctity of human life.

Although womanist theology began to take shape in the mid-1980s and therefore is still in the early stages of its development, it has been evident from the beginning that this way of thinking has important historical roots which date back to, and antedate, slavery in the United States. That is, black women of Afrikan descent did not develop what we now know as womanist traits only after they were forced into slavery in this country. As Afrikans their entire worldview was a religious one and they already possessed a strong, deeply embedded sense of the worth of human life, and therefore knew the importance of the survival-liberation of persons. In addition, the Afrikans were strong, self-determined women. And although their native Afrikan cultures stressed family and community, the women could be very independent, forceful, in-charge, self-determined, military and even political leaders when the situation called for it. Indeed, in many Afrikan cultures in antiquity the women had equal power, voice, and privilege with the men. So they came to American slavery already with a strong sense of personhood, self-determination, and dignity, which made it impossible for most of them to passively accept enslavement.

**A Personalistic Theology**

A deep sense of the dignity of persons, emphasis on survival-liberation, sense of self-determination, belief in a personal God who cares, and ability to be independent when necessary are important characteristics of womanist thought. These traits were also evident in many nineteenth-century black foremothers. However, these are also traits that one finds in the philosophy of personalism. This is the first and the oldest comprehensive American philosophy still in existence and with a growing number of adherents, including this writer. It was first systematically formulated by the Methodist Borden P. Bowne (1847-1910), who taught philosophy at Boston University from 1876 until his death. The first Afrikan American to study personalism under Bowne was John Wesley Edward Bowen (1855-1933). The most famous Afrikan American to study it (under Bowen's student, Edgar S. Brightman) was Martin Luther King, Jr. Essentially a metaphysics or way of thinking about reality, personalism is the view that persons are the highest (not the only!) intrinsic values, and reality is personal. Theistic personalism maintains that God is the Supreme Person in the universe; that Being in whom all life forms live and move and have their being. The most distinguishing feature about personalism is that it is a worldview, a way of thinking about, living, and behaving in God's world.

Although fundamentally a metaphysics, figuring what personalism means is not foreign to
Afrikan and Afrikan-American experience. Nor is it foreign to the experiences of women of Afrikan descent. That womanists have not used the term personalism does not detract from the fact that personalistic ideas are found throughout their work. We see this most particularly in their emphasis on the dignity, self-determination, moral agency of black women, and their belief in a personal, loving, and just God. These are fundamental tenets of personalism as well. Furthermore, personalism can provide for womanist theologians a conceptual framework for grounding their belief in the sacredness of black women and their conviction that God is personal. A sixth trait of womanist theology, then, is that it is a personalistic theology.

CONCLUSION

Unlike Jacquelyn Grant and Emilie Townes, I hesitate to actually name nineteenth-century black foremothers “womanists,” for they themselves did not know this term. In this I stand with Karen Baker-Fletcher. However, in light of the chief traits of womanist thought it is appropriate to say that nineteenth-century black women exhibited the traits of womanism, and therefore were at least forerunners to this still developing tradition.

Womanist theologians remind us that this way of thinking about and doing theology is still in its early stages. Cheryl Sanders names seven topics that will likely have ongoing importance in womanist theology and ethics. These include: spirituality, theodicy, ontology, dialogue with black male and white feminist theologians, biblical ethics, biomedical ethics, and black church relations. In each case Sanders identifies one or more womanist who focuses on the topic. Some important omissions from Sanders’ list include intracommunity violence and murder among young Afrikan-American males, and black women and men in prison.

Black on black violence and murder and the exorbitant number of Afrikan American men and women in jails, prisons, and other “correctional” facilities are means of making them disappear either permanently or for shorter or longer periods of time from the black community. This terrible waste of human resources and talent destroys rather than builds community. We have witnessed and heard about too many killings of young Afrikan-American males by other young Afrikan-American males, a tragedy that has gone beyond epidemic proportion. This is why Jewelle Taylor Gibbs and her colleagues have argued so cogently and passionately that young black males between the age of 15 to 24 are an “endangered species.” Indeed, when we add to this the tragedy of substance abuse, whether through use of alcohol or crack cocaine, there is in place a very effective but sinister method of reducing the population of the black community.

In addition, Karen Baker-Fletcher sees as a major task of womanist ethicists the resistance to and unmasking of the color-line as “an artifice constructed to deny relatedness and to preserve illusions of the righteousness of racial injustice.” Her reading of the writings of historical black women convinces her that womanist ethics is an “ethics of courage, survival, liberation, resistance against oppression, and belief in the sacredness of all persons.” Therefore there is no place for colorism, a type of intracommunity racism among African Americans whereby “oppressive negative color stereotypes” are internalized. This phenomenon arose during American slavery. The rapes of black women by white men produced children of very light complexion. By comparison these children were frequent-
ly treated better than darker complected ones. Colorism has both to do with the physical complexion and with the socio-political stance of Blacks. It also has to do with making distinctions between who is more authentically Black in the African-American community. Fortunately Katie Cannon, Diana Hayes, and Karen Baker-Fletcher are womanist theologians who have no patience with such foolishness.

As I cite these concerns I want also to point out that unlike black theology which emerged nearly thirty years ago, womanist theology has only been in existence since the mid-1980s. The signs are that womanists are increasingly aware of these and related issues. So in my judgment there is no cause for alarm at this point.

I agree with J. DeOtis Roberts only in a qualified sense when he says that womanist theology has existed long enough that it is now fair game for external criticism, i.e., criticism from other than womanist scholars and activists. Womanists need more time to further define and clarify their field and to identify what they consider the key issues for African-American women, the black community and church, and for humanity in general. At least it seems to me that womanists are the ones to say when it is time for such critique, or when they themselves will respond to it. This is not to say that criticisms should not be made, however. For I have pointed to a number of limitations or concerns above. And yet my gut tells me that for a while longer any external criticisms should, as far as possible, at least be kept within African-American circles. I think it is still too soon for hard criticisms to be made outside womanist circles and especially in unfriendly public forums.

This notwithstanding, I know from experience that external criticisms of new movements generally come early. But when a group’s voice has been effectively silenced, or at best muted for several hundred years, it is reasonable to allow time and space for the members to find their own voice and to express all that has been pent up for so long, without being menaced by hard, frequently brutal and insensitive external criticisms. It is important to first know what the representatives of womanist theology and ethics are saying, and why. There will be plenty of time for criticism.

However, in light of the ascendancy of substance abuse, i.e., its sell and use, proliferating acts of violence and murder by young African-American males against African Americans, exorbitant rates of unemployment and underemployment in the black community, and many other problems confronting black families, I understand perfectly the concern that Roberts raises. He clearly does not invite criticism of womanist theology and ethics for criticism’s sake. A senior representative of the black theology movement approaching retirement, he has seen too much of the aforementioned family and community-destroying practices. Since womanist theology and ethics seeks to be both particularist and universalist in outlook and to focus on the well-being of the black family, it follows for Roberts that they should be more vocal about issues that are destructive to family and community. Indeed, Delores Williams and Kelly Brown Douglas address some of the issues of black female-male relations in a collection edited by Cheryl Sanders, *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology* (Fortress Press, 1995).

Nevertheless, I do think it quite appropriate that I, a male African-American theological social ethicist, should read, discuss, teach, and reflect on the emerging literature in womanist theology and ethics for my own and the instruction of uninformed men and women in seminary, church, and society. And yet I feel compelled to do this as humbly
as I can, and without the presumption of being an expert, I must seek the forgiveness of Afrikan-American women and confess my own complicity in systematic sexist attitudes and practices against them. In addition, it is my intention that the decision to read, reflect on, discuss, write about, and teach womanist theology and ethics be supportive of the work of scholars, pastors, and activists in the womanist tradition.

NOTES


5. Ibid., p. 140.


16. Ibid., p. 87.

17. See Rufus Burrow, Jr., “Afrikan American Children: Values that Save” (Forthcoming issue of the A.M.E. Church Review).


19. Ibid.


24. Although Alice Walker maintains that a womanist is "a feminist of color" it is not assumed here that every feminist of color is a womanist.
26. Ibid., p. 25.
27. Ibid., p. 46.
28. Ibid., pp. 51, 56.
30. Grant, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology" in Black Theology: A Documentary History 1980-1992. James H. Cone and Gayraud, eds. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), p. 278. This article was first presented as the Charles B. Copther Annual Faculty Lecture at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1986, and was published in the Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center 13 (Spring 1986).
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., II: 1277.
38. Ibid.
40. See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, The Black Church in the African American Experience (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 179. "Both the survey data and the qualitative responses show that thus far the movement of black liberation theology has had a relatively limited influence upon the urban clergy and their congregations." The authors state further that "the great majority of black urban ministers in the United States—at least two-thirds of them—have not been affected by the movement at all."
42. See James H. Harris, Pastoral Theology: A Black-Church Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
53. Grant, White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus, p. 205. Here Grant names Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell (19th century), Mary McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer (20th century) and "countless others" as womanists.