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WOMANIST
THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

A Reader

Edited by
Katie Geneva Cannon,
Emilie M. Townes,
and Angela D. Sims

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not fear loss of our theological center just because we take seriously different theological or nontheological strategies for black liberation. We should remember that we will be creating spaces for God's continuing revelation in the midst of our dialogue.

The principle of renunciation of privilege as it applies within the black church means that we as individuals within the church reaffirm the greater good of the community, striving to nurture character as well as to discern and fulfill obligations and duties to one another. The principle of renunciation of privilege in both the macro and micro contexts will aid us in making the hard ethical choices required by social stratification.

Finally, from their logic of interstructured oppression and sense of socioreligious ethical responsibility, the black club women found that they could never lose sight of the fact that they were bound to all classes of black women and black people, that alleviating gender oppression was a part of alleviating race and class oppression. Moreover, they understood the importance of both individual efforts and collective action. The paradigm for a mediating ethic embodied in the black women's club movement is the foundation for a socioreligious ethic for black liberation that affirms that black liberation will not occur apart from the eradication of race-gender-class oppression. Hard ethical choices will need to be made in light of sociohistorical, political, and economic realities that constitute the complexity of black oppression today. African Americans must choose to live into the tensions of the external and internal dimensions of black oppression and to seek to mediate between accommodative and aggressive political activism, between religious radicalism for and the socioeconomics of societal change, between progress for individual Blacks and progress for Blacks as a group. The vision of God's justice, intragroup social responsibility, and the logic of interstructured oppression deriving from the ethic of the black club women are the basis for a socioreligious mediating ethical process for black liberation that may truly be the way to overcome the depth of race-gender-class oppression. Thus it will provide the necessary content of an ethic for black liberation as well as a way to engage authentically in intercommunal reconciliation.

Chapter 3

Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have

Emilie M. Townes

*o sing to me a song of hope
a song of tomorrows
a song of todays*

*o sing to me a song of hope
a song of days gone by
and moments unborn*

*o sing to me a song of hope
that gives me ways
to walk the path*

*o sing to me a song of hope
that leads me home
that leads me home
—"untitled," emt*

Many African-American women in the theological disciplines have gravitated to the use of Alice Walker's term *womanist* as both challenge to and a confessional statement for their own work. Walker's four-part definition that contains the elements of tradition, community, self, and critique of white feminist thought provides a fertile ground for religious reflection and practical application. The challenge, which is an interstructured analysis¹ that begins with race, gender,

1. For a further discussion, see Marcia Y. Riggs, "The Logic of Interstructured Oppression: A Black Womanist Perspective," in *Redefining Sexual Ethics: A Sourcebook of Essays, Stories, and Poems*, ed. Susan E. Davies and Eleanor H. Haney (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 97-102; and her book *Awake, Arise, Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994).

and class, provides for a dynamic tension in womanist thought for all of the theological disciplines. Such an analysis is not only descriptive, but prescriptive as well. Womanist religious reflections provide descriptive foundations that lead to analytical constructs for the eradication of oppression in the lives of African Americans and, by extension, the rest of humanity and creation.

The confessional element of *womanist* means that it is a term that cannot be imposed, but must be claimed by the Black woman who is engaged, from her own faith perspective and academic discipline, in the eradication of oppression. Therefore, the use of the term *womanist* to describe a theorist's or practitioner's work is one of avowal rather than denotation. This confessional stance is crucial, for the womanist engaged in theological reflection is also holding in tension her own identity as a Black woman with the vicissitudes of the theological discipline or ministry in which she is engaged. This provides an organic undertaking of constant self-reflection in the context of the "doing" of one's vocation and avocation. Also, the womanist is not free to name others as womanist if this is not a term they claim for themselves. For example, describing Black women from the nineteenth century as womanists is inaccurate. Although many like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Sojourner Truth, and Anna Julia Cooper employed an interstructured social analysis in their activism, none of these women claimed the term *womanist* for herself. At best, and most faithfully, these women embody nascent womanism that provides a rich framework for womanists of this era to flesh out.

There is no one voice in womanist religious thought, but a symphony that at times may move to a cacophony. There is still much debate about the need to hold all of Walker's definitions within the womanist frame versus picking and choosing the elements one finds helpful in her work. There are some womanists who challenge, in the second definition, Walker's inclusion of homosexuality as a desirable norm in the African-American community. Others resonate with the themes of the mother-daughter dialogue in the first definition and see this as pivotal for their work. Still others are drawn to explore the dimensions of self-care and self-love and affirmation in Walker's third definition. Some womanists focus on the need for a piercing critique of white feminism (academic and practical) implied in her fourth definition. Finally, there are those who believe all four parts of Walker's definition must determine one's theoretical and analytical framework.

This debate has just begun and is far from settled. However, the commitment to work through these issues is strong. Therefore, there are many times in which the passion of the ideas turns into a marvelous and creative cacophony that refuses to settle for uneasy truces and obsequious compromises to appear united and of one mind in and to the theological academy or in the halls of the Black Church.

This has been, in the language of the Black Church, a homecoming for womanist ethicists. The dynamics of womanist thought immediately challenges the normative discourse and theoretical constructs of traditional ethical reflection. Rather than argue for universals, womanist ethics begins with particularity. It

does so with the knowledge that claims about universalities often evolve out of particular communities and ideologies that have been dominant, yet unacknowledged for being so. What is dominant is seen as the norm and therefore neutral.

Womanist ethics questions this hegemonic notion. Rather, a womanist perspective argues that because all discourse is rooted in the social location of those who speak (or are silent or silenced), such discourse is particular and ultimately biased. The task of womanist ethics is to recognize the biases within particularity and work with them to explore the rootedness of social location and the demands for faithful reflection and witness in light of the gospel demands for justice and wholeness.

As a womanist ethicist, I begin with the realization of the traditional role and place to which African-American women have been assigned and relegated. Katie Geneva Cannon points out that the assumption of dominant ethical systems implies that the doing of ethics in the Black community is either immoral or amoral.² This traditional reflection is predicated on the existence of freedom and a wide range of choices. As Cannon notes, this "proved to null and void in situations of oppression."³ This freedom is not available to white women and women and men of color, as well as to poor people and representatives of marginal groups in United States society.

Cannon goes on to note that dominant ethics makes a virtue of qualities that lead to economic success: self-reliance, frugality, industry. It assumes that the moral agent is free and self-directing and can make suffering a desirable norm. In Cannon's view, this understanding of moral agency is not true, however, for African Americans. The reality of white supremacy and male superiority forces Blacks and whites, women and men, to live in different ranges of freedom. In situations of oppression, freedom is not a choice, nor is self-reliance. Frugality is enforced and suffering is present, but neither is chosen. Cannon believes that Black ethical values cannot be identical with the obligations and duties that white society requires of its members.

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES

An African-American woman as a moral agent must contend with race, sex, class, and other sources of fragmentation. The challenge for a womanist ethicist is to create and then articulate a positive moral standard that critiques the elitism of dominant ethics at its oppressive core and is relevant for the African-American community and the larger society.

Black women continue to play a highly functional and autonomous role within the family and Black society because of economic and social conditions that have devalued and ill-defined the Black woman historically and forced

2. Katie Geneva Cannon, "Moral Wisdom in the Black Women's Literary Tradition," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1984): 172.

3. Katie Geneva Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 2.

African-American men and women into ill-fitting negative stereotypes. Black women are forced, as are other women of color and white women, into images of womanhood imposed by a larger society. African-American women also know that they will never reach this model because of the constraints of race and class. One aspect of racism is that it has structured dominant and subordinate roles and relationships between Blacks and whites and placed African Americans within a relatively closed system while blaming deviant behavior on them.

Black women have been called matriarchs, Sapphires, and castrators. This is in large measure because of the active role many Black women have had to play in the support of children, husbands, and Black society. All have usually assumed the Black woman's capabilities. Black women who have the legacy of clearing the fields, caring for the children of others as well as their own, and functioning in marginalized roles—while being called on to provide the backbone of African-American values—are considered a deviation from the norm and an anomaly in United States society.

Key for me as a womanist ethicist is the notion of justice. Justice involves the radical act of truth-telling—of reality testing and reality challenging. As both a people and as genders, African-American women and men have been stereotyped, categorized, scrutinized, and dichotomized into a people straining against the bonds of double-consciousness and triple-consciousness. As a womanist ethic of justice emerges, it must be radically rooted in the truth-tradition and history of African-American life and witness. It cannot succumb to a praxeological framework in which all the women are white and all the Blacks are men.

The task of the womanist ethic of justice is to move within the tradition descriptively yet jump for the sun to climb beyond the tradition prescriptively. An ethic of justice must be based on the community from which it emerges, for it can degenerate into flaccid ideology if it does not espouse a future vision that calls the community beyond itself into a wider and more inclusive circle. This circle is neither tight nor fixed.

DESCRIPTIVE LEANINGS

Contemporary womanist ethicists can take important cues from slave women who practiced forms of resistance to the onslaught on the humanity of Black people. These women practiced abstinence in refusing or attempting to avoid intercourse with white masters. In this vein, they also delayed marriage to a slave male with the hope that childbirth would happen in freedom.⁴ Abortion and infanticide were also methods of resistance, but were less common than abstinence. Black women's resistance to sexual exploitation had political as well as

4. Darlene Hine and Kate Wittenstin, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," in Filomena Chioma Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), 291.

economic implications. By using resistance, women negated, through individual or group action, their role in the maintenance of the slave pool.

A womanist ethic of justice responds from its own well of history and socio-political methodology: we cannot bring together that which we do not know. A unity forged on imperfection, romance, poor vision, limited knowledge, and fissured reconciliation will always benefit those who have the power and leisure to enforce and ignore differences. Unity as a teleological goal can be dangerous and life-defeating, for it can overwhelm and neglect equality. Unity is only vigorous in an atmosphere that is unafraid of difference and diversity—an atmosphere that does not view difference as a barrier, but rather as the proverbial stew whose aroma is richer and whose substance provides greater sustenance for the work of justice.

The collective experience of Black women, like the experience of any group, can inform and challenge the dominant world view. African-American women must seriously consider a womanist analysis of society, culture, and history. Such an analysis calls for an integrated and multitextured survey of church and society. It also helps ground Black women within our community as we seek to applaud and admonish our communities for the work they do and leave undone. For a Black woman to forget her blackness is to deny a rich heritage that crosses the continent of Africa, moves in the waters of the Caribbean, touches the shores of South America, and is vibrant in the rhythms of Alice Coltrane and Sweet Honey in the Rock. She loses part of her very soul if she turns away from Zora Neale Hurston or Phillis Wheatley. African-American women must continue to draw from the deep well of the lives of Fannie Lou Hamer and Septima Clark.

However, care must be taken to neither idealize nor to romanticize African-American women. An even greater danger is to confuse collective with monolithic. Strength, determination, and steel will are part and parcel of the Black woman's heritage. Yet this does not mean that this heritage is always healthy. She has been the breeder and the unwilling mistress. She has been the big mama and the prostitute. She has suffered in kitchens and borne child after child. She needs not only to celebrate her heritage, but take a long, hard look at it.

With such a rich history—one of tragedy and triumph—what cues are there for us in ethics? It is my deep belief, from the particular perspective of the Black woman in the United States, that an ethic of justice is rooted in two concepts: liberation and reconciliation. These concepts are the components of transformation for the individual and society. Liberation and reconciliation respond to the experience of African-American women in this country and in churches. However, liberation and reconciliation move beyond the particularity of African-American women's lives to touch the Black community at large and to call to the whole church and the whole society.

Liberation has spiritual and social dimensions. The aim of liberation is to restore a sense of self as a free person and as a spiritual being. The spiritual dimension of liberation concentrates on the acquisition of power that enables each person to be who she or he is. This power is not one that dominates and

subordinates. Rather, it fosters the security to give that self to others in a love that requires no response in kind. This does not mean that a person participates in self-abnegation. Giving of oneself does not mean the automatic forfeiture of dignity and worth. One gives through love, but not at the expense of self. A delicate balancing act achieves spiritual liberation, for one must give through the God-presence in each of us and not solely through the fully human parts of oneself. The challenge of spiritual liberation is choosing between wholeness and destruction.

Social liberation is participation in the world. It is a concern for others as we bring ourselves together to witness our faith. Liberation requires that each person acquire an attitudinal mind-set that refuses to accept any external restraint that would deny her or him the right of being. Implicit in this is a strong self-affirmation that cannot be challenged successfully by any external force.

This is not a *carte blanche* opportunity to justify unjust or inappropriate behavior because we “feel” or “sense” that others or structures are trying to “control” us. There are contexts, such as in guidelines and rules regarding clergy sexual misconduct and clergy professional ethics, where such structures of accountability are apt and proper external restraints on our behavior. Unfortunately, in our humanness, we can stray off the pathways of righteousness, and we need help in holding ourselves and each other accountable to proper conduct.

Similarly, there are times when our colleagues, our families, and our friends can rightly intervene in stopping us from doing destructive behavior such as self-abnegation. There are times when the demands of ministry are great and there are a multitude of tasks at hand. It is important that if we are unable to set limits bounded by our humanity, that others help us set them. A key thing to remember is that the gift and the tragedy of the atonement are our legacies, but it is not our mandate to relive them in our ministries. Like the women who stood at the foot of the cross and the women who were at the tomb, we are called to be witnesses and heralds of the good news. We are not called to either knock Jesus off the cross or to spend a lifetime in ministry rolling the stone back into place.

Social liberation and spiritual liberation are tremendous challenges and awesome gifts for us, for liberation combats the double-consciousness all of us live under in this society. This double-consciousness is seeing ourselves through the revelation of others. This tragic twist of self-perception was explained by W. E. B. Du Bois in his discussion of double-consciousness:

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.⁵

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Books, 1961), 16–17.

Double-consciousness wreaks a particular kind of disfigurement for women in leadership positions in the church. It is more than external conditions that impinge on our living; it is also the terror from within which is the mutilation of the spirit and the body. The challenge is to refuse dehumanization and affirm and value the gifts women bring to society and to the church.

An important distinction must be made: liberation and freedom are not the same. Liberation is a process. Freedom is a temporary state of being. It is more of an event we point toward, work for, and hope for. Freedom is that moment of release in worship where we know that God loves us and holds us tenderly. Freedom is that moment of triumph as we watched Nelson Mandela walk into freedom for the first time in twenty-seven years. It is the hope of freedom that drives liberation.

Liberation is the product of freedom. Liberation is God's work of salvation in Jesus. Because Jesus died for us and lives yet again in us, we have the promise of wholeness through our brokenness. Liberation is the process of struggle with ourselves and with each other that begets the transformation of all of us to our full humanity. Liberation establishes freedom, yet it must go on to explore greater dimensions of personhood. Liberation cannot be content with the situation, despite the health it may produce for people. There is always the possibility of being transformed anew. Through liberation, freedom may be made manifest, but that freedom is not a permanent state of being. When we are made whole, we are asked to give of that wholeness. Our act of giving fragments us. This fragmentation opens us to the possibility of new and greater transformation. Liberation is dynamic. It never ends.

Reconciliation has both an objective realm and a subjective realm. The objective realm is God's activity in our lives in which God creates a new relationship with us. This new relationship is the gift of freedom. This freedom is the new being whom God creates in us through our faith. There is the freedom honed through liberation that is our activity. The objective realm also holds the freedom that is God's activity of love and grace in our lives.

The subjective realm of reconciliation is what we do among ourselves. This realm is the restoration of harmony with groups and with individuals. In this realm, we acknowledge a respect for the world we share and our need for others and their experience. The subjective realm of reconciliation is what we do to remain faithful to God's gift of freedom in our lives.

Through the objective realm, God liberates us for freedom; through the subjective realm, we acknowledge and then accept God's gift to us through faithful and loving relationships with others and the whole of creation.

Liberation and reconciliation must occur in order for whole women and men to emerge. There is no proper ordering of liberation and reconciliation when the goal is transformation of the person and also the society and church in which she or he lives.

A nonreconciled people cannot be a liberating people if the goal is transformation. Similarly, a nonliberated people cannot be a reconciling people. When the

goal is transformation, the oppressive structures of this society and our churches must be challenged if the event of freedom found in the midst of transformation is to lead us beyond the wounds of injustice. Working together, liberation and reconciliation, pointing toward the freedoms found in transformation, name the oppression of our lives and our institutions for what they are—sinful—and demand that we work with God for a new thing—the reign of God in all of life.

PRESCRIPTIVE LEANINGS

The prescriptive elements of a womanist ethic of justice must be as relentless in its analysis as it is inclusive in its recovery of history and sociopolitical analysis. A womanist ethic cannot be content with a justice that addresses only a particular person's or group's wholeness. A womanist social ethic must embrace all segments of society if it is to be thorough and rigorous. We must continue to push ourselves into a critical dialogue that presses the boundaries of our humanness. Race, sex, and class analyses are crucial. Still, we need to challenge ageism (of both the young and the seasoned), homophobia and heterosexism, the myriad of issues around accessibility, our own color caste system, and the "Pandora's box" around issues of beauty. The work we are about is not only eradicating an unjust white social order that names us as less than; it is also about the ways that we help that system find new ways to deem us children of a lesser God.⁶

Two voices emerge from womanist ethics: the pastoral and the prophetic. Both are necessary and complementary forces that coalesce into a day-by-day ethic that serves both the mundane and the extraordinary in our lives and in the witness and work of the church.

THE PASTORAL VOICE

The pastoral voice⁷ entails the ability to be self-critical, to provide comfort, to accept others, and to encourage growth and change. The pastoral voice, the voice of leadership in community, must always be prepared to consider all of the information, the varying social contexts that groups and individuals bring to bear, the various means of social analysis. No one element in the world or in the society contains all of the truth—all of what faith-filled Christians need in discerning God's will. Leadership in community will be ineffective if we do not accept the humanness of being human. We can understand structures, but if the

6. Mark Medoff, *Children of a Lesser God* (New York: Dramatist Play Services, 1980).

7. This category of voice is an attempt to appeal to the African-American religious experience of the role of the pastor as comforter. Max Weber's classic essay "Politics as a Vocation" offers the categories of an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility. These are helpful categories in reframing the question of leadership. See Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 120–128.

pastoral voice is poorly developed or undeveloped, then we do not fully consider the need to care for the people behind the institutions. We are not able to accept and recognize the diversity that can occur around any ministry of the church.

Combining the prophetic with the pastoral is crucial, in my view. Passion for a faithful witness must be deep and abiding. However, it can be difficult to make our passion flesh if we are unable to accept the reality of human failing, human wavering, human ambiguity. It is imperative that a leader struggling for a faithful witness and an ethic of justice hold in tension personal and social transformation. If we address only one form of transformation, the person seeking an ethical witness cannot be a full participant in community or mobilize that community for ministry.

Developing a go-it-alone mentality in ministry and failing to work effectively with other church leaders or church groups is all too easy. We can be tempted to put forth our agenda and take unilateral actions that destroy any notion of community and dialogue. Unilateral actions can hurt or anger others to the point that we become marginalized and sometimes completely cut off from the decision-making process. Perhaps a first reaction to this will be embitterment rather than self-examination. However, self-examination is crucial if one begins to suspect or recognize that one is caught in a pattern rather than an occasional misunderstanding.

There are times in ministry when we must be innovative-creative because that is the only way to express our concern for justice. As innovative-creative persons, we can perform the invaluable service of debunking myths and stereotypes about peoples and groups. We can be strong and passionate voices for justice, but we must temper this with life in community. If our moral standards are so rigid that we have no room for grace, then we fail to allow for human failings and weaknesses—even our own. Clinging to a fiercely high moral code of conduct for others and for ourselves can alienate people because of our attitudes of disdain and disapproval, rather than empowering people through our attitudes of justice and hope.

We must strive to understand that the personal side of transformation in which people are being changed and renewed requires an entirely different set of critical and analytical skills to affect a faithful witness. As agents for agitation seeking to bring in the new heaven and new earth, we can help others find their witness, their voice. Still, we must hold as precious the humanity of all people and the blessedness of creation. We must reach out to others with tenderness, concern, and grace, and never forget that the pastoral voice must also blend with the prophetic voice in a womanist ethic of justice and hope.

THE PROPHETIC VOICE

Being innovative-creative also suggests the notion of a prophetic voice. Christian womanist ethics must take the Bible and the life and ministry of Jesus seriously. Passion for justice and ethical witness has within it a concern for right

relationships among peoples. We must have a strong and willful prophetic voice in response to the injustices we see heaped on people and on the rest of creation. We must grow and cultivate a social analysis embedded deeply in our faith.

The Black Church (and much of Black theo-ethical thought) has its own peculiar form of patriarchal oppression. It reflects the same patriarchy as the society, but it is also imbued with the dynamics of racism of the dominant white society. Therefore, Black women must deal not only with the negative effects of racism, but with Black men's own virulent form of sexism as well.

There are no lasting short cuts to curing the complexity of problems a womanist ethic of justice faces. It is better to take the long, hard, steady route in which a womanist ethic explores both the individual and the African-American community. The route is forged from the knowledge that womanist ethics not only seeks to understand white folk; it also needs to be in a dialogue for understanding and solidarity with the various tribes of Native Americans, the Hispanic cultures, and the Asian-American cultures. It must also carry on a search for understanding globally. As Marian Wright Edelman says so well, justice is neither cheap nor quick; it is a hard, ongoing process.⁸

A prophetic voice contains six key threads.⁹ *The first is the desire and the ability to discern the will of God.* God is on the side of oppressed peoples. Therefore, the primary task of the Christian ethicist is to transform the present unjust structures into just ones. The measure of a just structure is found within these six key threads.

The search for justice must have both manifest and latent functions.¹⁰ The manifest function, our conscious motivation, will vary according to contexts and conditions. There may be common ministry issues that we face—spiritual malaise, violence in the community, disagreements among those with whom we are in ministry, poor educational structures, and so on. However, how those issues take on a peculiar cast when placed within the varying contexts in which we do ministry is an important question. The structures and individuals behind the issues we face in ministry reveal the latent function of our work. A simple solution to violence and crime is to build more prisons and draft tougher laws. However, crime and violence are often the result of the impact of drugs in our communities—be they rural, suburban, or urban. We cannot settle for simplistic analyses.

The church, and we as its representatives, must work hard and long to discern God's will in the midst of injustice and hopelessness. The issues we face in

ministry go much deeper than the surface and require us to develop the ability to move between the surface to the heart of the issues that people face today.

Transforming unjust structures into just ones is a colossal task. However, we can take comfort in scripture and be challenged by it. Many more of us live our lives as Esther than as Ruth. Yet both women are there for us in the biblical record to draw from for our own witnesses and ethical reflection. The tragedy of Sarah and Hagar leaps out to us as a call to examine the story-behind-the-story in our social relationships and how we are to act in faithfulness.

Transforming unjust structures into just ones will not happen quickly, and this transformation may never happen within our lifetimes or within our ability to see into the future. However, each act we take to move ourselves away from the mayhem of evil is a step closer to transformation. I suggest that no act for justice is too small or too insignificant. It is tempting to conclude that we are acting faithfully only when we can see the tangible results from the work we do. Ethics is not so neat a discipline, and it is often far from the tangible. Ethical reflection and action are found in the mundane and the every day. It is as much, if not more, in the small acts we do each day in response to God's voice of love, compassion, and judgment in our lives. In the words of Shug to Celie in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, "it ain't a picture show."¹¹

Second, in discerning the will of God, *the prophetic voice also exposes the oppressive nature of society.* The committed Christian must stand for justice and transformation. There are times when the only recourse open to us is resistance. Oppression uses many tools to repress our attempts to live faithfully in a world that often denies humanity. Obvious tools such as racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and ableism have caused many of the roads of oppression when such evil structures are named as greater goods. We live in a time when the small gains of affirmative action are increasingly disdained as repressive forces for those who no longer benefit from the overt tools of oppression and destruction. We live in a time when we are hearing much of the public discourse argue for a mythical "even playing field" where, if one works hard and long enough, her or his natural talents will bring them to the level of living and wholeness to which they aspire.

Myths are precious when they represent that which truly lives beyond our grasp and are a call for us to live into the new heaven and earth. Myths are deadly when they are grand narratives of progress that fail to mention the very unequal places we all begin from in life. As some of us inherit privilege, some of us inherit despair. Our tasks are to acknowledge where we begin and work to craft a church and a world that are not bending on faithful knees to economic gain and social status—even when these come in the forms of the ministry we do.

Third, *the prophetic voice must be an agent of admonition*—pointing out the wrongdoing in society and stressing the need to have human action (and

8. Marian Wright Edelman, *Families in Peril: An Agenda for Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 106.

9. Jacquelyn Grant, "Tasks of a Prophetic Church," in *Detroit II Conference Papers*, eds. Cornel West, Caridad Guidote, and Margaret Coakley (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, Probe Edition, 1982), 137–38. Grant's essay points to a broader understanding of the prophetic church. I expand her original five categories to discuss the nature of a prophetic voice in ministry.

10. Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 105, 114–18. Merton defines manifest functions as "those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognized by participants of the system." Latent functions are "those which are neither intended nor recognized."

11. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 176–177. This conversation is about the nature of God. Much of what the character Shug argues for about the way one brings God with them rather than waiting for him [sic] to show can also be said about the nature of faith-filled ethical reflection.

inaction) conform to God's will. In dealing with the myths of injustices in our society, we must acknowledge that our drive toward unchecked progress and upward mobility is killing many of us and threatens the very fabric of creation. To sanction any form of oppression in the name of a false god such as progress is to turn away from the realities of the histories of how we have destroyed others so that a few might prosper.

Fourth, *a womanist ethic is unapologetically confrontive*. The root meaning of confront is "to face together." Implicit in this is a relationship between equals. There must be mutual respect for the dignity of others, a willingness to engage in dialogue, and an awareness and acceptance of diversity. If one thrives in a power dynamic that places one over and against rather than with, all prophetic voice is lost. We must learn to trust and respect the gifts God has given us to speak the truth and act through our faith. Black women need not apologize for naming injustice for what it is or for challenging the Black Church and the church universal to live into more of what it is called to be.

Fifth, *the prophetic voice seeks to create a community of faith, partnership, justice, and unity*. This speaks of the need to engage in a pastoral relationship as well as a prophetic one. To omit the very human need for affirmation, respect, and acknowledgment makes empty and incomplete any move to be prophetic. We must take seriously the promise of a just world and devote our lives to attaining that for all peoples.

This is why coalition building is crucial. Our partners are those folk committed to the struggle against oppression—those who understand the need to act and reflect and analyze. Few social problems, and certainly not the multitude of social problems that face the contemporary church and society, can be solved with a single strategy. Therefore, womanists, like the church and folk we love and critique, must move beyond ideological boxes and obtuse language.

Justice is beyond history. It is not limited to the realities and limitations of this world. The divine future breaks into the present with each thorny act of justice. The womanist agenda for justice recognizes and relies on the gospel message of justice, and not one crafted solely from human desires and idiosyncracies.

Within the church and without, women and men are competing for life. This competition is a cruel wager on scarce resources in a hegemonic culture and social structure. Playing out this wager means settling for an imposed hierarchy in which only one gender's concern is addressed at a time. The result is a praxeological disaster and an endangered community. A community affirms the worth of the people who are in it and invites others to join it because it offers life and health. To set up a hierarchy of needs based on femaleness and maleness is short-sighted and discriminatory. This lives out the model of the white power structure and any version of Christianity that condones oppression.

If we are to model justice together, as female and male, then the descriptive and prescriptive elements of such a justice must be scrutinized with the utmost care. As womanists we must listen to our stories, our experience, before we try to shape the new creation. Such care-filled listening, construction, and recon-

struction are mandatory in a rigorous praxis. A rigorous praxis is at the heart of a womanist ethic of justice. However, the tunes are not only sung by African-American women. Peoples of all colors have a word to say to us. Rather than commit the modernist sin of universal presumptions of knowledge and reason, womanist descriptive evaluation seeks to listen to the plethora of voices as we discover our own voice in the ring shout.¹²

This means that class analysis must be a part of our tool kit for justice. Such analysis cannot remain descriptive. It must critique and offer a new vision for African-American society and the Black Church. Until recently, with the work of Marcia Y. Riggs, the impact of the rise of the United States Black middle class in the 1870s has not been studied with precision by African-American people of faith.¹³ Race analysis has so dominated inquiry and rhetoric that class and gender issues are assumed as mere appendages to justice. The incomplete praxis and inadequate reflection that have marked feminist theory and ethics is evident in Black theory and ethics as well.

Failure to analyze and strategize with class consciousness will doom all our efforts to mediocrity if not defeat. It is imperative that we begin to address the peculiar dynamics of a class within a class. African-American society has its distinctive features that cannot be explained by using the descriptions of hegemonic culture. Collapsing all African-American experience as the "Black experience" is the worst kind of modernist turn.

Finally, *self-critical inclusivity is mandatory*. The challenge of womanist ethical discourse and action is to guard against using the masters' tools to dismantle a supremacist house:¹⁴ arrogance, universalism, progress, grand cultural narratives, renovation, domination, subordination. This challenge is done with the acute awareness that the cultural narratives and cues we learn from birth may tempt us to create new systems of domination and subordination. The task constantly remains for us to evaluate goals and standards in light of the gospel understanding of justice. This justice is dynamically revelatory—always within our grasp and just beyond it.

LIVING OUT THE CALL

As parish pastors approach the task of a womanist understanding of being an ethicist and a pastoral/prophetic voice in the congregation and the culture, we must work to understand where our gifts and liabilities are in our ministries.

12. See my discussion of the ring shout in Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 72. Also helpful are Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 62–71; and Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 62–63.

13. Riggs, *Awake, Arise, and Act*, see esp. chaps. 1–3.

14. Audre Lorde, "The Masters' Tools Will Never Dismantle the Masters' House," in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–113.

This is crucial, for the work of ethics and the demands of both the pastoral and the prophetic voices are significant, if not daunting. Harkening back to spiritual and social liberation can help us realize our limits. In doing so, we may well discover that we have moved beyond our limits, but we also see that we have not yet lived into our limits. The task of living out our call can help us uncover the realities and possibilities in our ministries.

Part of being an ethicist in pastoral ministry is opening the doors in the rooms of our lives and being willing to walk into them to discover the grace and hope and judgment that may be in each. This, at first glance, may be the last thing in the world we want to do in the midst of births and deaths and board meetings. However, if we develop the ability to assess and reassess our ministry, the direction in which it is going, and ask ourselves if this is the path of God or the path of ecclesiastical reward or human folly, we will find more energy and commitment to do the work that God would have us do. Key in the task of the ethicist is the ever-developing ability to analyze and critique the world we find ourselves in (and the worlds of which we are not a part).

Tools such as discovering how we understand and use liberation and reconciliation can move us into such an analysis. Perhaps one of the greatest gifts women in pastoral ministry can offer themselves and the church is the ability to ask the tough, yet faith-filled, questions about justice and righteousness and the church's response to the challenges of our time. For example, an easy solution is sought to the complexities of suicide or deaths by accidents. The ethicist in us can help people find a God who is large enough to take our rage, our confusion, our questions, and perhaps our unbelief, and continue to love us and hold us close in times of trial and confusion. The ethicist can work with youth groups when a friend or peer takes her or his life or if someone is killed in an automobile accident. So many of the youth I talk with in my own church resent an answer like "This was just the will of God" when they are faced with their own mortality and the loss of a friend in the same breath. What they yearn for, and what we can provide, is a person from a community of faith who hears their fears, their anger, and their confusion, and helps them walk through this time and, in the process, find a deeper, and often a richer, understanding of God working in their lives.

The pastor as ethicist can help these moves happen as we lean on both the pastoral and prophetic voices in our ministry. For the pastor as ethicist in parish ministry needs to be both a comforter and an agent of hope. When a church is faced with the hard task of discerning the direction of its ministry, the parish ethicist can help set in motion a process (liberation) that leads the church through asking questions and seeking answers to those questions about its own gifts and abilities. This becomes crucial in our chaotic times. So often churches respond in an either/or manner to chaos—becoming insular and concerned only with the membership of the church or seeking to answer all the problems and providing all the solutions to those problems through its programming and worship services. The problem arises when neither response calls out the gifts and abilities of that church—or its pastor. Using the tools of a womanist ethicist,

people in pastoral ministry (of all races and ethnic or class backgrounds or sexual orientation) can begin to set in place a structure for dialogue and discernment in the life of the church. This structure is important, because as a church seeks to discover and/or affirm its ministry, the members of the church may well feel vulnerable, uncertain, excited, and anxious. Often these emotions can come all at once from various individuals or within each individual. A clear structure that all can see and be confidently guided by can help the church and its pastor continue on the path of discernment and faithfulness.

There are also times in the church when there is a serious rending of the community's fabric. Such times come when there is a legacy of clergy sexual misconduct that the pastor inherits from a predecessor. They come when a husband who has a history of physical abuse with his wife and children kills or is killed by a member of his family. They come when a member of the congregation who is trusted and respected is discovered misappropriating funds either in the church or in her or his workplace. They come when a child reveals the sexual, emotional, and physical abuse he or she has endured. These times signal a soul-deep shredding of the "life" of a congregation and can become like deaths in the community. Such times call for the pastor as ethicist to call on our pastoral and prophetic voices as well. There is a human need present in which healing is crucial. There is also the opportunity to name social and individual sins in our midst, discover how they are interconnected, and invite a time of naming those sins out loud. We can discover how, as a community, we can walk through these times of death and mourn them in healthy and creative ways and vow to work faithfully to refuse to allow such injustices to go unnamed or unaddressed.

Key in all of this is that the parish pastor as ethicist learns that we cannot do this alone. It takes nurturing and prodding a community to take on its call. It also means that we must learn to lean on and truly trust God who is the Spirit and Hope in our lives. This is not always easy. Waiting on a community (which is not a passive activity) takes patience. In the waiting, the pastor must be working to cultivate and grow the community into a more faithful witness. No opportunity is too small—incidental conversations, counseling sessions, working with committees, celebrating the ordinances of the church, experiencing our leisure time.

However, the greatest work is what we must do within ourselves and in our relationships with God. The gifts of reconciliation are truly in evidence here. God's covenant with us is an ever-present and sustaining one. There are times when we will "know" this in ways that are too profound for words or human reason. It is in these times that our partnership with God will be unquestionable and our journey on the path God sets before us clear. These may be fleeting times, but as we allow God to work in us, they do come as blessing and as gift. There will also be times when God seems far off and the pathway unclear. These are times when spiritual disciplines such as prayer and fasting are imperative. Each of us must find her or his own spiritual pathway to God, but find it we must. It is in these times that God's covenant and our search for faithfulness will

carry us home. It is from this objective realm that we can move into the subjective realm of reconciliation—and vice versa. For as we seek the restoration of harmony with others that is the work of the subjective realm, God's covenant with us may be seen anew.

This is the song of hope for which we must find the words, the meter, the key, and the notes. It is tempered with the high cost of living and also the knowledge of how precious is this journey.

CONCLUSION

In her 1974 essay, Theresa Hoover states: "To be a woman, black and active in religious institutions in the American scene is to labor under triple jeopardy."¹⁵ This state of affairs has not changed. In United States society, African-American women are at or near the bottom of the economic ladder. Women compose nearly 75 percent of the traditional Black Church, yet the higher levels of decision making do not reflect this statistic in proportionate numbers.

There are increasing numbers of African-American women in seminaries, the ordained ministry, and in the ranks of lay professionals. A growing body of literature and reflection is emerging from African-American women in academic theological circles on the nature of the Black Church and church universal; the mission, identity, and scope of ministry; social and theological ethics; and biblical hermeneutics. Lay professionals and laywomen join in the chorus of resonant voices in articulating the experience and also the gifts of African-American women in the church.

A womanist ethic of justice provides rich resources for a church and a people seeking faithfulness. It models a witness that can be adapted for various racial ethnic contexts, genders, ages, and denominational identities. The voices of this ethic, pastoral and prophetic, are attempts to live life fully and faithfully in an age where we often struggle to see the next dawn. We must be about the business of promoting the full partnership of children, men, and women in creation with God. We search for the possibilities; we pray for the will to grasp them. In the process, we may well be outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful in our behavior. We do yearn to know more and in greater depth than was considered good for us. We may actually be responsible, in charge, and serious. Nevertheless, we must always seek first God's vision and live our lives into that good tomorrow. This is our song of hope that leads us home, leads us home.

15. Theresa Hoover, "Black Women and the Churches: Triple Jeopardy," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 377.

Chapter 4

Re-Reading for Liberation

African American Women and the Bible

Renita J. Weems

I am grateful to the planners of this conference¹ for the invitation to gather in the beautiful town of Ascona, Switzerland, to deliberate with women from around the globe on the ways in which our hermeneutics intersect with our social and political identities. Gathering with women from as far away as Australia and Palestine and as nearby (to the US) as Costa Rica and Canada has resulted in a heady week of exchanging stories, comparing journeys and learning to view the world through different eyes. Hearing stories about the brave and challenging work many of us are involved in as the first, only, or one of a handful of women in our countries, universities, religious traditions, and always in our families to reflect on the Bible with feminist eyes, to examine our faith and our culture through the experiences of other women has made all of us view our work differently. We return home feeling less lonely and more a part of a movement that is international in scope and certainly larger than ourselves. It was a week of mixed blessings.

Nestled away as we were in a remote, mountainous retreat, deliberating with women from various parts of the world and from vastly different backgrounds

1. The conference referred to was the Feminist Hermeneutic of Liberation conference in Ascona, Switzerland, in July 2000.