

## WOMANIST CHRISTOLOGY AND THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

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### ABSTRACT

This article looks at the similarities and dissimilarities between early Methodism and the contemporary movement of Womanist theology in North America. The article seeks to answer several questions regarding the complementarity of Womanism and Wesleyanism such as: In what ways is Womanist theology consistent with the Wesleyan tradition? Are Womanist and Wesleyan mutually exclusive positions? Of particular importance, is Womanist Christology congruent or conflicting with the Wesleyan tradition? The essay responds to these questions by discussing the salvific nature of Jesus and the symbolism of the cross in light of the historic abuse of Black women and then sets this discussion in conversation with Wesleyan Christology.

When the angel of the Lord found Hagar in the wilderness, the angel asked her a question that is pertinent to our theological enterprise today. The angel asked Hagar, '[w]here have you come from and where are you going?'<sup>1</sup> When we attempt to discuss gender issues in the church, in relation to Womanist theology, this question is foundational to the emergence of Womanist<sup>2</sup> thought, as well as Womanist doctrinal understandings. Womanist theology is a relatively new discipline in theological discourse, and, as such, it is still evolving and taking shape. Yet, Black women have been critiquing, reconstructing and

1. Genesis 16:8 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

2. The word 'Womanist' emerged from the work of Alice Walker in 1983 and has been embraced by many African-American women in academic settings. In the front of her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), Walker offers a four-point dictionary-style definition of Womanist.

theologizing since Hagar's radical theological move in the wilderness that prompted her to name her God.<sup>3</sup>

Womanist theology arose out of the need for a theology that would take seriously the perspectival lens that African-American women's experience brings to the theological enterprise. Womanist theology critiques the multidimensional oppression of African-American women's lives, with respect to sexism, racism, classism and heterosexism. It challenges structures, symbols and socio-political realities that foster oppression/domination of Black women in particular, as well as Black men, humanity in general, and nature.

As I study Wesleyan theology, I see some convergence with the basic tenets of Womanist theology. Methodism began as a grassroots movement with concerns for the poor and marginalized of society. It is an inclusive theology, and yet it is particular. It is inclusive, in that it is receptive to the voices of various communities. The United Methodist Church encourages dialogue and informed praxis in an ever-changing world. It affirms the diversity of humanity and the gifts at work in persons in the world. And yet, United Methodism is particular. United Methodists have been at the forefront of religio-political struggles for equality, justice and peace. They have challenged the status quo to alleviate oppression of their sisters and brothers.

The contextual nature of early Methodism gave rise to many questions and challenges, but had as its goal meaningful relationships with Christ and humanity. The entrée of contextual theologies, such as Womanist theology, have given rise to contextual theological and Christological questions. Apart from Jesus, Christianity has no salvific content, center or pivot. Asians, African Americans, Latin Americans and women have raised theological and Christological issues out of their own contextual particularity.

Early (i.e. mid-late 1980s) Christological questions asked, 'Can a White, male Jesus serve as a redemptive symbol for African-American women?' 'Who is Jesus Christ for the African-American woman?' 'How does Jesus address the plight of the marginalized and oppressed of society?' Womanist theologians have answered these questions, in part, by celebrating Jesus' Semitic ethnicity, by focusing on his humanity without negating his maleness, by affirming Jesus' embodied presence in the faces and lives of Black women, and his solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized of society. While the aforementioned questions and observations are pertinent, the contemporary dialogue in Womanist Christology takes a different focus. Given the historic abuse of Black women's bodies, from Hagar through to the present day, and the increasing

3. Genesis 16:13 (NRSV).

awareness of domestic violence and child abuse in American society, how does one interpret Jesus' death on the cross? Does the death on the cross glorify violence? Does the cross sacralize abuse? Battered and abused women are raising these questions. How are the academy and the church to respond to the symbolism of the cross, juxtaposed with silence around the issues of abuse and violence in most churches? How does one teach and preach healing through the life, death and resurrection of Christ without romanticizing suffering? Womanist theologians are raising these questions.

As I reflected on my answers to these questions, I wondered how my theology fits into the Wesleyan tradition? As a United Methodist and a theologian I am confronted with yet more questions. In what ways is Womanist theology consistent with the Wesleyan tradition? Are Womanist and Wesleyan mutually exclusive positions? Of particular importance, is my Womanist Christology congruent or conflicting with the Wesleyan tradition?

This essay will seek to explore and posit some answers to these questions. It will respond to these questions by discussing the salvific nature of Jesus and the symbolism of the cross in light of the historic abuse of Black women. I will briefly set this discussion in conversation with Wesleyan Christology.

### **Womanist Theology**

Womanist theology affirms the humanity and particular experience of African-American women, yet does not divide the African-American community or ignore God's care for humanity and nature. This theology employs the vocabulary, experiences and ideology of African-American women. Womanist is a term which has emerged and been adopted by African-American female ethicists, biblical scholars and theologians to indicate the particularity and distinctiveness of the African-American woman's experience. The term 'Womanist' was coined from Alice Walker's book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. In her book, Walker references the term 'womanish', a frequently-used term in the African-American community, which refers to one who is 'outrageous, audacious, courageous'. She extends the term to represent one who is 'responsible, in charge and serious. She loves women's culture...but is not a separatist. A Womanist is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female'.<sup>4</sup> A Womanist, says Walker, is a 'Black feminist or feminist of color'. Walker adds, 'Womanist is to Feminist as purple is to lavender'.

4. See the preface of Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* cited above for complete definition.

Many Womanists have critiqued and enlarged this original definition. Womanists are particularly concerned with the 'isms' that oppress African-American women. Our work unmask, disentangles and debunks religious language, symbols, doctrines and socio-political structures that perpetuate the oppression of African-American women in particular, but also African-American men, children, humanity in general and nature. Like Wesleyan theology, Womanist theology is inclusive and at the same time particular. It refuses to bow to hegemonic dichotomous thinking that splits mind, body, spirit, gender, races, social class or nature. Its foundation is Jesus Christ who is inclusive, relational, particular and, yet, universal. Jacquelyn Grant adds to the understanding of doing Womanist theology. She asserts that the 'Womanist is courageous enough to demand the right to think theologically and to do it independently of both White and Black men and White women'.<sup>5</sup>

### **Where Have We Come From?**

Resulting from Jesus' death emerged several doctrines of the cross and the nature of the atonement, offered by the early church. Certainly, in this short paper, I cannot address the various debates, but let me highlight a few developments, which are significant to the discussion. Western theology looked to the doctrine of substitutionary atonement developed by Anselm of Canterbury. It was clear that the New Testament gave abundant evidence that Jesus died for the sin of humanity. Yet Anselm used the Bible as well as other sources, such as medieval penal systems and legal codes, in the development of his argument. Anselm asserted that God became human through an act of expiation, which overcame the break in humanity's relationship with God caused by sin. Jesus was viewed as identifying with the fundamental struggle of daily living. The doctrine was critiqued during the Middle Ages. It was during the Reformation that Luther and Calvin initiated the discourse around the substitutionary atonement into Protestant theology.

The historical discussion in classical theology has informed subsequent Christological arguments, but it misses the pluralistic nature of New Testament Christology. The New Testament contains several Christologies. Western Christianity has bound the plurality of the New Testament Christologies into a static Christology, which has become normative in theology. The static absolutism of traditional Christology does not allow the various voices of the New Testament, let alone twentieth-century contextual theologies, to be heard.

5. Jacquelyn Grant, *White Woman's Christ and Black Woman's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 209.

Is not the pivotal question of Christology found in Jesus' own question to Peter, '*Who do you say that I am?*' (italics mine). The question is relational and contextual. It is out of Peter's existential reality that Jesus asks for Peter's understanding of his relationship with, and to, Jesus. As the New Testament clearly demonstrates, changing times dictate new confessions of Christ. 'Christians have both the freedom and the obligation to confess Christ in appropriate and relevant ways in their specific context that are in continuity with the witness of the Bible and their particular experiences, needs, and hopes'.<sup>6</sup>

Womanist theology looks beyond the static absolutism of classical Christology to discern and celebrate the presence of Jesus in the lives of the abused and oppressed. It confesses the saving work of Christ in ways that are appropriate and relevant to the experiences of Black women and the faithful witness of scripture.

### Womanist Thought

Women's experience is relevant and vital in the theological enterprise. Theology must, above all else, be relevant and authentic. While White women have experienced sexism and, to varying degrees, other forms of oppression, such as classism and heterosexism, their experience has not been the experience of African-American women. An authentic, relevant theology and Christology for African-American women cannot ignore the historic and contemporary victimization of their bodies. It cannot ignore the historic theological justification for violence against African-American women. Their abuse was 'justified' through the rationale that they were slaves, without rights or control over their own bodies or procreative powers, who were to be 'obedient' to their 'masters'. The slave girl, Harriet Jacobs, was taught by her mistress, 'thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself'. Jacobs, reflecting on the brutalities she had endured during slavery, made an enduring observation. She said, 'But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor'.<sup>7</sup>

This type of justification of violence has been part of the dominant culture of theology from Hagar, through the Middle Passage and slavery, to sexual abuse and violence today. Some Womanists are questioning the validity of glorifying Jesus' death on the cross in light of this historic and present reality.<sup>8</sup> To

6. See Daniel L. Migliore's discussion of the pluralities of Christologies and expression in *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 143-45.

7. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 16.

8. See Deloris Williams's discussion of the cross as a symbol of violence and abuse in

be sure, suffering is a part of the human condition and all peoples have experienced suffering. Abuse and violence pervade the lives of women of every ethnicity. Yet African-American women have experienced a legacy of abuse and violence perpetrated against their bodies that has been justified through sexualized stereotypes and mythologies that denied the presence of God. The abuse of their bodies denied that they were created in the image of God.

I think that Wesley would take notice of this discussion with some outrage! The centrality of God's sanctifying grace, available to all, would underscore his argument. Wesley was very vocal in his opposition to the oppression of Blacks and women. He stood, uncompromisingly, for human dignity, and denounced slavery. Though United Methodists continue to be confronted by the issues of racism and oppression, there is a genuine, and I believe, sincere, effort to bring about reconciliation. The past (and present) victimization of Black people, men and women, has not been forgotten.

Like the Wesleyan tradition, Womanists use African-American women's experience, the Bible, tradition and reason as some of their sources for doing theology. 'Black women's experience must be affirmed as the crucible for doing Womanist theology. It is in the context of this experience that Black women read the Bible'.<sup>9</sup> For the African-American Christian woman, the Bible is a major source for validating life and religious experience. 'Though Black women's relationship with God preceded their introduction to the Bible, the Bible gave some content to their God-Consciousness'.<sup>10</sup>

The Bible was used as an instrument of oppression during slavery. However, the liberating message of the gospel reverberated in the souls of African-Americans over and against the oppression heaped upon them by slave masters. For Wesley, the Bible centered on God's grace for humanity through the saving death of Jesus. This included the slaves. Wesley's 'Thoughts Upon Slavery'<sup>11</sup> was a strident denunciation of racism, classism, and the abuse or exploitation of Black humans. His observation of his mother and her work for God informed Wesley's later openness to women in the ministry.

*Sister in the Wilderness: The Challenge to Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

9. Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 279.

10. Cecil Wayne Cone, *Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville, TN: African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1975), ch. 2.

11. Thomas Jackson (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley*, XI (Abingdon Press, 1872), pp. 59-79.

### Where Are We Going?

Humans violated the sanctity of Jesus' body. They beat him, and humiliated him, killed him on the cross (on a tree), then stripped him of his clothes, and exposed his body. It is remarkable how similar the treatment of Blacks has been. The bodies of Black men and women were hung from trees, beaten, humiliated, stripped and killed. The Bible says that Jesus *became sin for us* that we might experience the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Though I understand the cross as the culmination of human evil, I suggest that Jesus *became* abuse, violence, dehumanization and oppression so that we might experience wholeness, safety, full humanity and agency. Thus, the cross does not sacralize abuse but is an example of it. The cross represents what God was willing to sacrifice so that no others would be sacrificed. It is not a shrine to violence that calls for torn flesh and bleeding bodies, but an eternal statement that humans should not be abused. As a human (representing both male and female) dying on the cross, how does Jesus' death condone violence against women? Does this death on the cross also validate the killing and imprisoning of African-American males?

To be sure, we must critically examine the meaning and messages of Christian symbols and seek symbols that are not oppressive. At the same time, we must pursue Christological doctrines that are consistent with the character and presence of God, and are liberating to the entire human and natural community. To deny the violence of the cross is to deny the reality of human violence in Jesus' life and ours. Jesus, like so many after him—Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer—was persecuted and killed because he risked all to stand for justice. Wesley would agree that the cross mandates a theology of risk rather than a theology of sacrifice.

A theology of risk is the God consciousness and God confidence to risk all to fight against injustice and oppression, even if it means that one may be called upon to give one's life. A theology of risk employs a liberating message of the cross that breaks the cycle of violence in Black women's lives. The message of the cross is not one of resignation to violence or demands for revenge; rather, it is a passion for justice. It is an awareness of the Christ presence in one's life that empowers one to seize one's personal agency to act against, rather than acquiesce to, victimization and oppression. A theology of risk breaks the cycle of violence and counter-violence by moving toward a new

humanity that is self-loving, other-affirming and community-creating.<sup>12</sup> I think this Womanist position is also very much Wesleyan.

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12. This thought has been prompted by Daniel L. Migliore's discussion of the attributes of God as self-giving, other-affirming and community-creating. See Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 151.

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