

THE BIBLE AND AFRICENTRIC PENTECOSTAL MORAL DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract

The following article elucidates a framework for moral decision-making, which reclaims features of African traditional religions and includes these ideas in an approach that can be used by African-American Pentecostals to justify moral claims. The suggested approach privileges the role of the human agent, not a collection of texts, in determining the rightness or wrongness of an act, or states of affairs in the world. This paper, too, invites the African-American Pentecostal to appreciate the fact that the Bible is not, a comprehensive ethics manual to be regarded as the Word of the Radical Presence. The essay closes by showing how the present model has the philosophical capital to make a strong case for what can be viewed as the distinguishing features of an Africentric Pentecostal ethical methodology and to position African-American Pentecostals to use the Bible responsibly in deciding the goodness or badness of choices and particular moral actions.

Introduction

The primary task this essay sets itself is to respond to the question: "Which tenets should inform the conceptual framework that governs the use of the Bible in moral decision-making in Africentric Pentecostalism?"² Is there a robust model Black Pentecostals can use to frame their beliefs about what light the Bible can cast on the rightness or wrongness of the moral action in the private sphere or when they are formulating value judgments about the current state of affairs in African-American communities in the twenty-first century? While this paper is not the first attempt to situate the Bible in the discussion on a method in Ethics, it charts

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²In the present essay, the adjective Africentric denotes a point of view, formulated by persons of African descent and whose characteristics, interests, and agenda emerge from the general predicament of persons of color in the African Diaspora.

a new direction in this area by framing the conversation on moral philosophizing in an Africentric Pentecostal context.³ Therefore, this essay identifies and builds upon three claims that are critical to moral decision-making in the Black Pentecostal traditions: (1) Belief in the always immediate, direct experience of “G-o-d”; (2) Belief in total obedience to the direct experience of “G-o-d,” and (3) Belief that the Bible, in some way, discloses the will of “G-o-d” in regards to defining acceptable conduct for human beings.

Belief in the accessibility of The Radical Presence is one major tenet in Africentric Pentecostal moral philosophy. In this article, the present author adopts the term The Radical Presence and uses it as a descriptor for “The Holy.” The Radical Presence, then, represents what Western Christians commonly call “God,” Arab speaking Christians call “Allah,” the Yoruba might call “Olodumare,” or the Ashanti might call “Nyankopon.” The present author uses The Radical Presence for “The Holy” to draw attention to the deeply held view by Black Pentecostals that The Holy is always near, available, and waiting to reveal The Radical Presence’s self; consequently, a direct experience of “The Holy” is always possible.

The belief that obedience to The Radical Presence is fundamental to determining appropriate moral conduct is a second major tenet in Africentric Pentecostal decision-making. This approach to distinguishing good moral actions from bad moral actions bases itself neither in ascertaining the consequences of actions nor in raising questions about the qualities or moral characteristics inculcated by moral actions in an agent. The good in this approach is simply “doing what The Radical Presence says or instructs the agent to do.” Since Pentecostal moral philosophy works with the assumption that correct moral action is doing what The Radical Presence commands humans to do, moral philosophers would contend systems for determining proper moral living in Black Pentecostalism are akin to what is commonly known as Divine Command ethics.⁴

Believing that knowing the will of The Radical Presence emerges from reading the Bible is a third central idea in the moral, epistemological framework of Black Pentecostals. These camps share assumptions about the role that the Old and New Testaments should play in deciding the

³For a very good publication that casts light on methodological issues involved in using the Bible in moral deliberation, see Charles Curran and Richard McCormick, eds., *The Uses of Scripture in Moral Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

⁴Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (New York: OUP, 2015), 67-71.

rightness and wrongness of behaviors and in evaluating current states of affairs in the world.⁵ Noteworthy is it that because Fundamentalists, too, hold a similar, if not the same belief as Black Pentecostals that the Bible is a necessary part of the picture in regards to identifying those actions that are praiseworthy and those actions that are blameworthy, Black Pentecostals are often identified but incorrectly referred to as Fundamentalists.

Regardless of the brand of Black Pentecostalism, it is commonplace for African-American Pentecostals to maintain that the Bible speaks clearly and constructively to every moral problem on the human scene. The argument, on the one hand, can be made that African-American Pentecostals assent to what the present article calls *inherent absolutism* in regards to the Bible. Inherent absolutism refers to the belief that the Bible contains some special axiological property that is independent of the state of mind of rational subjects, and that this intrinsic feature of the Bible positions it to be viewed as the container in which all ethical truth is present or originates. This assumption reveals essential philosophical and hermeneutic pre-commitments accepted by Black Pentecostals about the moral positions in the Bible, namely that the points of view on a moral action in ancient Israel and in the first century Christian communities should be the standard for evaluating human actions on the current scene.

By accepting inherent absolutism in regards to the Bible, the person affirms that act "X" is right or good *if and only if* act "X" corresponds to the moral positions in the Bible; consequently, the agent is making a normative claim about the moral points of view in this literary corpus. Ascribing superiority to the moral positions in the Bible, however, cannot but provoke a series of intellectual crises for individuals who seek to use this document to discern moral direction in the twenty-first century. Four features of the moral positions in the Bible justify this claim. (1) The Bible contains competing ideas about the same moral issues, e.g., beliefs about intermarriage, the distribution or recipient(s) of the tithe, and reasons for

⁵The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), headquartered in Memphis, Tennessee, is the largest of the African-American Pentecostal groups in America and is a notable example of the Trinitarian camp in Black Pentecostalism, and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW), headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana, is a notable example of the Oneness camp amongst Black Pentecostalism. For a listing of Black Pentecostal organizations in America, see Wardell J. Payne, ed., *Directory of African American Religious Bodies*, 2nd ed., (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1995), 152-191.

keeping the Sabbath.⁶ (2) The Bible admonishes problematical, unacceptable moral behavior on the part of human agents. The Bible orders actions, which a person in the twenty-first century would consider appalling and in most cases, would never do. For instance, the Bible asserts that a person whose conception is the result of incest be disallowed from membership in the congregation of YHWH. What is more, the Bible bans the grandchildren of these persons from participating in the life of a local faith community.⁷ Should persons whose conception is the result of incest be disallowed from coming to Church? Should the descendants of these persons be banned from participating in the life of a local faith community? It stands to reason that most Black Pentecostals would answer *no* to both questions. (3) The Bible contains instances of alarming behavior on the part of the deity, wherein YHWH punishes innocent people for actions for which they neither initiated nor for which they were personally responsible. One example is an episode in the David traditions in the Hebrew Bible. The Deuteronomistic Historian (DtrH) tells the story of the deity instructing David to take a census, and the same narrative indicates that God punished the people because David counted them. Seventy thousand human beings died because of nothing they did; Israelites and Judeans lose their lives because of the actions of David.⁸ (4) Many issues that are features of the contemporary moral landscape and that are core themes in African-American social ethics and political thought were not features of the moral landscape in ancient Israelite society. The prison industrial complex, federal spending on education, colonial domination, racial stereotyping, healthcare, racial injustice, and voters rights are major socioeconomic and political issues for African-American societies, but these subjects receive virtually no direct treatment in the Bible.⁹ The agent who is seeking to use the Bible to decide pressing moral issues in the twenty-first century and who accepts the position that the rightness or wrongness of an act consists in duplicating behavior in the Old and New Testaments has a complex situation on his or her hands, especially when

⁶See Deut 7:1-6 versus Deut 21:10-14; Deut 14:22-29 versus Mal 3:10; and Ex 20:11 versus Deut 5:15.

⁷Deut 23:3

⁸This episode in the life of David appears in 2 Sam 24:1-16. First Chr 21:1-15 offers an alternative account of this event, by contending that Satan not YHWH told David to count the people.

⁹Animal rights, biotechnology, environmental ethics, globalization, transgenderism, and the use of social media, just to name a few, are principal ethical issues for current mainstream American society, but the Bible gives no straight forward, direct treatment of these subjects.

the agent has to adjudicate issues which are foreign to the worlds from which the texts in the Bible come.

If determining right and wrong in Africentric Pentecostal moral philosophizing emerges from compliance with the will of the *Radical Presence*, and if knowing the will of the *Radical Presence* emerges from the reading of the Bible, the critic can argue that three components minimally comprise moral decision-making procedures in African-American Pentecostal moral philosophizing. These *pieces* are the following: the Radical Presence, a literary text, and an agent, whether the agent is acting as an individual or as a person in a community.¹⁰ The former refers to an agent, who is acting on behalf of him- or herself, and is exempt from answering to anyone for his/her decisions or actions; the latter denotes a person who is acting on behalf of a group and is in a web of relationships where he/she has to answer directly for his/her decisions and actions. Since it is axiomatic in Black Pentecostalism that the Bible occupies a key place in systems for discerning and gaining insight into the Radical Presence and into delineating proper moral action, and since this article casts light on biblical interpretation, it is both a journey into Africentric Pentecostal constructive ethics and a voyage into biblical hermeneutics.¹¹ This article, too, expands the work begun in Africentric biblical hermeneutics with the publication of *Stony the Road We Trod*, by focusing on ideas that should inform efforts to appropriate the moral points of view in the Bible in the African-American Pentecostal tradition.¹²

It, therefore, comes as no surprise that there is a pressing need to place beliefs about the Bible in Africentric Pentecostal moral theorization under comprehensive inspection. This present article argues that appreciating fully the role the moral agent plays in moral decision-making positions African-American Pentecostals to welcome critical scholarship on the Bible and use the Bible responsibly in determining the rightness or wrongness of an act, or states of affairs in the twenty-first century. That is to say, accepting the fact that the rational being identifies and ratifies the select moral traditions in the Bible, empowers the agent to act responsibly,

¹⁰This essay will use the term agent to refer to the rational being involved in the decision-making process. As a rational being, a person has the ability to involve himself or herself in that kind of abstract thought that can appreciate potential, non-actual states of affairs in addition to deciding how he or she will use his or her free will. These distinguishing characteristics of agents are critical to the discussion at hand.

¹¹The belief that the Bible has a special status in processes for deciding the rightness or wrongness of an action informs but does not constrain the procedure for determining the rightness or wrongness of an act in the deliberations of the present author.

¹²Cain H. Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

and moves skillfully from textual instance in the Bible to the formulation of appropriate moral claims in response to controversial issues in Africentric Pentecostal ethical discourse on the present scene. This conceptual framework, too, positions the African-American Pentecostal agent to demonstrate through argumentation, when and how those moral ideas in the Bible might be mistaken, at least on some points. The next section of the article identifies vital beliefs in regards to how Black Pentecostals should view the Bible in its moral decision-making processes.

Re-Envisioning the Bible in Africentric Pentecostal Moral Theorization

First, the agent should work from the position that words in the Bible are different from the *Word*, i.e., the moral and theological *truths* of The Radical Presence. The Bible itself is a three-dimensional physical object, which our eyes can see, and our hands can touch. The *Word* of The Radical Presence is not three-dimensional. Since Bibles are limited, by being located in space and time, the same Bible cannot be in all places at the same time. The agent can place the Bible in his or her suitcase or travel bag. The rational being can add the Bible to his or her iPhone or iPad. The *Word* of The Radical Presence, however, is bound neither by space nor location. The ontological status of a Bible is that it is physically constituted; therefore, it cannot exist without the actuality of other material items. Most of all, the Bible is destructible: one can slice it into pieces by placing it into a shredder. The existence of the *Word* of the Radical Presence does not depend upon the actuality of a material substance: the *Word* of The Radical Presence is timeless, ever-present, unmade, limitless, indestructible, and non-physical. Since the *Word* of The Radical Presence and the Bible have fundamentally mutually exclusive essential properties, it follows that these items ontologically are not the same items.¹³

Second, the agent must accept that the Bible did not drop down from the sky on a silver platter as a completed project. Biblical scholarship confirms that subgroups or blocks of materials comprise the Bible and that

¹³Since the Word of the Radical Presence and the words in the Bible are not identical, the agent must raise the question: in which way does the Bible represent the Word of the Radical Presence? This question deserves attention because the agent in Africentric Pentecostalism seeks the Word of the Radical Presence in regards to moral decision-making in his/her life.

these materials appeared at different periods in the history of ancient Israel. While some of these data appeared before the Exile, other collections of data appeared during the Exile, and other subgroups of materials in the Bible appeared after the Exile. What is more, subgroups of materials in the Bible took shape in different locations in the biblical communities, among different social groups. The lore of ancient Israel was collected and assembled into larger literary units, and by late in the first century CE, the First Testament had been codified by the rabbis. The Bible, therefore, appeared in stages, and it is a by-product of human culture. It contains specific modes of expression that emerge from culture, politics, and group dynamics. The Bible, too, is a literary by-product of rational beings, who mainly inhabited Northeast Africa and the African land mass.¹⁴

Third, the agent must recognize that the Bible is a literary product with competing translations in its reiterations. The versions of the Bible are legion. These versions of the Bible are present for distinct social groups, racial groups, religious groups, and linguistic groups. Moreover, there can be differences in how these versions translate into English wordings that appear originally in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts. One example from the Old Testament illustrates this point. Opposing translations of Prov 18:24 are present. The KJV says: "A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother." The NIV contains the translation: "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." While these versions of Prov 18:24b agree in their translation of the Hebrew into English, these texts contain different wordings for Prov 18a. The translation of the KJV answers the question: what must a person do to attract many friends? The translation of the NIV casts light on what happens to a person who has many friends?¹⁵

Fourth, the agent must understand that the Bible is not a moral actor. It does not reach out to the rational being. The individual, instead, chooses to reach-out to the Bible, through reading it. The decision to read the Bible was an expression of the power of the human being. It was not a product of external forces that either constrained or determined his/her

¹⁴Syria-Palestine is an extension of the African continent, and it is probable that many of the persons or subgroups who are responsible for preserving, collecting, and assembling the Bible were inhabitants of Syria-Palestine. For further discussion on Syria-Palestine as an extension of the African Continent, see Cain H. Felder, "Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation: A-J*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1999), 14.

¹⁵I would translate Prov 18:24a to read: a man of friends will break himself into pieces. I would agree with the translation of Prov 18:24a that appears in the NIV.

behavior. The fact that the agent resolved to read the Bible indicates minimally that other possible courses of action were present. By focusing his/her attention on the Bible, the individual reveals something about his/her ability either to act or not to act as he/she sees fit. That is to say; the agent initiates the act of reaching out to the Bible. It is an uncompelled behavior; consequently, it demonstrates freedom of the will. The person picks the day and time he or she will read; he or she selects the place where he or she begins to read; he or she decides the sequence in which he or she reads, and the rational subject determines the agenda or the goal for studying the Bible. The words of Renita J. Weems are apropos, for she says, "the agent can decide for what he or she will read." The act of reaching out to the Bible through reading it is a voluntary, intentional act that grounds itself in the free will of the moral agent.¹⁶

Fifth, the agent must recognize that the Bible does not tell its reader how to interpret it. Since the decision to read the Bible is a demonstration of free will, it is important to mention that interpretation of the Bible, too, is a volitional, willful enterprise. How the person views, Scripture is in his or her control. The moral agent chooses the lens through which he or she views the Bible. It is important to mention that objects, which require interpretation, are passive—*a priori*: by themselves, these items say nothing. Paintings, sculptures, and works of literature often require an audience and an interpreter to give them meaning and signification, especially when the author or originator of the work is unknown, not present, or leaves nothing behind to explain or to cast light on his/her creation. The Bible is an inanimate, contingent literary object. In the case of many documents in the Bible, the author or originator of the work is both unknown and not present. No writer of the documents in the Bible is present to tell the reader how to understand the specific document he/she produced that appears in the Bible. By itself, the Bible says nothing. It does not tell its reader how to interpret it. The meaning of the passages in the canon is not autochthonous in the texts themselves. The data in the Bible requires interpretation.

In other words, the reader assigns meaning to a text in the Bible. In this hermeneutical circle, the moral agent decides which particular idea(s) or sense to give to the data in the Bible. This business of assigning meaning to a text brings into play a host of issues, chief of which are the psychology and social location of the hermeneutical agent. This feature of the

¹⁶Renita J. Weems, "Reading Her Way Through the Struggle: African-American Women and the Bible," in *Stony the Road We Trod*, ed. C. H. Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 64.

interpretive process could include beliefs about the Bible as well as matters relating to gender, economic status, educational level, religious/denominational affiliation, and political stance. This means that prejudices and other internal, mental phenomena shape how the agent goes about assigning meaning to a literary piece in the Bible. These inner states of the individual are critical elements in this hermeneutical enterprise.

Sixth, the individual has to accept that the status of the moral ideas in the Bible resides not in the specialness or uniqueness of the act articulated in the Bible itself, for there are other Scriptures in the World's Religions that contain the same moral points of view and prescribe the same states of affairs in the Bible. The Pentecostal moral agent elevates the Bible to a place of prominence in his or her hierarchy of sources that inform his/her moral epistemology, and this philosophical move gives the Bible importance. The Pentecostal moral agent could allow the *Koran*, *The Holy Odu*, the *Guru Granth*, or some other religious texts to provide examples of living well, aids to spiritual formation, insights into reality, or standards for deciding in what does moral living consist. Without adherents or the consent of an agent, the Bible, by itself, contains no intrinsic property, which gives it the right to be the fundamental source for constructive moral philosophy. The Bible does not assign itself a place of superiority in the moral epistemology of the person. The agent must hand over moral authority to the Bible if he or she chooses.

Seventh, the agent should embrace the belief that reading the texts in the Bible breaks grounds for direct revelation from the Radical Presence. The soil of African traditional religions nourished this ideology, for according to the classic works on African Religion(s) by Mbiti, Ray, and Magesa, belief systems of Africans presuppose and embrace the following tenets and exhibit these common phenomena: (1) the "immediacy of the Holy;" (2) the belief in spirit possession; (3) the belief in expressing a personal religious encounter with spirits through psycho-motor phenomena, e.g., dancing or speaking in an unknown voice or language.¹⁷ Given that many slaves from West Africa brought their religious beliefs with them to America, it comes as no surprise that retentions from African traditional religions, i.e., beliefs in the immediacy the Radical Presence, and traditional Christian beliefs meshed in the fresh, religious ideology

¹⁷John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1991), 153-162; Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 111-115; and Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 229-234.

formulated by slaves in the antebellum South.¹⁸ The belief about the immediacy of the Holy in African traditional religions clears space for other claims from Christianity about the Holy to find their way into the religious world-views of Africans in America.

While the moral agent should seek to cast light on the meaning and signification of moral ideas, and instances of moral behavior in the Bible for today, he or she must appreciate the limits of human reason and philosophizing. Successful articulation of the connection and relevance of the norms in the Bible for moral action on the contemporary scene requires the guidance of the Radical Presence. What are the abilities of the proposed model? The next section articulates several strengths of this newly proposed set of beliefs for viewing the Bible and their implications for understanding agency in Africentric Pentecostal moral deliberation.

Using the Bible in Africentric Pentecostal Moral Decision-Making

This essay contends that the person, in consultation with the Radical Presence, plays the key role in defining those acts, which are good, and in identifying those behaviors, which are bad in Africentric Pentecostal moral decision-making. Accepting this proposed conceptual framework positions African-American Pentecostals to welcome critical scholarship on the Bible and to use the Bible responsibly in determining the rightness or wrongness of an act or state of affairs in some of the most distressed communities in the twenty-first century.

First, the proposed model places the agent, not the Bible, at the center of the hermeneutical enterprise. This situation now means that the human being can continue to interpret the Bible with extant models for reading this document, or the agent can formulate fresh models for interpreting this literary corpus. What deserves mentioning here is that every person who reads the Bible, reads it through a particular lens, and that one's interpretive lens is either an angle of vision on interpreting the Bible that the agent has adopted without giving any serious thought to his or her approach, or it is a method for reading the Bible that the person has consciously chosen and vetted. The Africentric Pentecostal agent now has

¹⁸Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 161-168; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: "The Invisible" Institution in the American South* (New York: OUP, 2004), 48-75; Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 139-180; and James A. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 150-158.

the opportunity to use instances of oppression and other forms of marginality that were corollaries of race, class, and gender as backdrops against which to sculpt paradigms for articulating possible meanings of the Bible. For African-American Pentecostals, this means that they can select models for interpreting the Bible, which emerge from the plight or predicament of persons of color in the African Diaspora.¹⁹

Second, the proposed model helps the Africentric Pentecostal moral agent to appreciate ethical and theological diversity in the Bible. Ethical and theological pluralism is the counter-argument to the belief or doctrine that ethical and theological monolithicity are distinctive of the ideology in the Bible. Just think about it, different notions of the *Radical Presence* and views about the moral life appear in the canon.²⁰ Adopting this model allows the individual to appreciate the richness of the features of the moral and theological landscape in ancient Israel and to have a realistic view of the primarily written corpus that informs beliefs about right and wrong in the life of African-American Pentecostal communities.

Third, the proposed model allows the moral agent to be aware of hermeneutical pluralism on the present scene. We should be mindful that the reader assigns meaning to most written texts in general and the Bible in particular. Since there is a plethora of readers, i.e., hermeneuts in the Black Pentecostal community, it stands to reason that there will be different ways in which to interpret the same lexical data in the Bible. For instance, it stands to reason that the lens Black Pentecostals from the 1950's and 1960's used to read and understand the Bible are different from the lens used by Black Pentecostals in 2017. It, too, is possible to argue that the lens Black Pentecostals in urban, culturally diverse areas, use to read and understand the Bible could be very different from the lens Black Pentecostals in rural, culturally homogenous areas, use to read and understand the Bible. Embracing hermeneutical pluralism invites the agent

¹⁹With the publication of *Stony the Road We Trod*, a fresh epoch in biblical interpretation appeared. This project was a major investigation into and illustration of current approaches toward studying and interpreting the Bible from an African-American perspective.¹⁹ Over the next thirteen years, the academic community published two major anthologies in black biblical hermeneutics. These texts were *Yet with A Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation* and “Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary US Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation.” These publications collectively represent the avant-gardes in recent attempts of persons of color to make sense of the biblical text.

²⁰Contrast salient ideas in Gen 1:1-2:4a and Gen 2:4b-ff; Exod 37:1-9 and Deut 10:1-5; and Josh 10:12-15; 2 Sam 24:1-2 and 1 Chr 21:1-2; Ps109 and Mat 5:43-47; Mk 6:8-9 and Matt 10:9-10.

to acknowledge that no one single hermeneutical strategy has a monopoly on truth.²¹ This method of exploring the Bible invites its disciples to consider the contribution that other strategies for reading the Bible can make to the business of understanding the canon. This claim invites the community to pay close attention to the ideas and presuppositions that the reader brings to the text. What is more, it guarantees that the Hebrew Bible continues to have meaning for readers today.

Fourth, the proposed model positions the individual to study the Bible with a concern for disenfranchisement in the biblical community. This means that the agent can affirm socioeconomic asymmetry in the biblical communities, by seeing the biblical community as she was: Israel was a social collectivity like any other community in the ancient Near East. Ancient Israel was replete with internal power struggles and economic agendas. Israelites fought, hated, oppressed, murdered, and stole from each other and others around them. Recognizing that marginalized persons were present in the biblical community and that a constellation of factors converged to work to the disadvantage of these persons is so important because the disenfranchised, oppressed, and the marginalized are prominent socioeconomic subgroups in Black Pentecostalism. Concern about moral issues relating to this aspect of the human experience should not get dismissed once one begins to read the Bible and to contemplate proper moral action on the present scene.

Fifth, the proposed model provides an opening for groups, and in this instance local congregations, to use the Bible in the construction of or in the establishment of valid moral judgments regarding issues, which receive little or no direct attention in the Bible. By including all affected persons in the conversation and allowing them to articulate their views on a particular problem, agents take ownership in moral judgment, and perhaps a consensus develops, or some level of agreement arises. Through dialogue, agents express their interests and respect the intentions and desires of others. People can enter I-thou relationships with each other. Through communication, via speech acts, agents can harness the power of discussion, namely by taking advantage of having conversations that are free from coercion and manipulation. Agents see each other as subjects and affirm that all persons can make contributions to understanding and appropriating the data in the Bible in regard to resolving conflicts once an issue ascends to the status of a moral problem. Because morally autonomous creatures comprise human communities, and because they

²¹John H. Hayes, ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), contains examples of strategies for reading the Bible on the current scene.

often have conflicting beliefs about *the good* and *the right*, rational discussion, which builds upon I-thou relationships, should be the context for determining *the good* and *the right* and those judgments that are morally valid. From this exchange over ideals, a consensus can develop or some level of agreement can arise, in spite of differences in class, race, or gender. This process is clearly a corollary of the new proposed method for viewing the Bible and understanding agency in moral decision-making in African-American Pentecostal moral philosophizing.²²

Sixth, the proposed model challenges the moral agent to reach-out to the Radical Presence. It permits the *Radical Presence* to encourage the person to explore the text with an eye toward personal spiritual formation and to develop a set of virtues in himself/herself, which abet in becoming more sensitive to the will of the Radical Presence. These moral and spiritual ideas can help the individual to become a better person and can help him or her in his or her ability to talk about how the Bible can help to elucidate the salvific actions of the *Radical Presence* in the lives of human agents. What this means is that the proposed strategy introduces a move into the strategy for reading texts that is absent in both Fundamentalist and Evangelical epistemological circles. Moral decision-making in the African-American Pentecostal tradition clears space for the Radical Presence to have ongoing, dynamic, and personal dealings with the agent. Allowing space for the Radical Presence to deal personally with the agent within the Africentric frame of reference positions the Black Pentecostal agent to be more aware of the direct, intuitive encounter of the Radical Presence he or she can experience.

Conclusion

The Radical Presence assists the moral agent in his or her spiritual formation, by pointing out that some texts in the Bible give us examples of how we should never act. In this way, the proposed method has the philosophical capital to navigate the complex literary terrain in the Old Testament and the ability to assist the reader as he or she seeks to answer the tough current moral and theological questions that can arise from an attempt to apply the moral points of view in the canon to moral issues on the current scene.

²²For a helpful treatment on how agents can reach morally valid claims as a social group, please see Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

The moral agent, therefore, must allow The Radical Presence to usher him or her into a realm where he or she can understand the Bible and gain valuable insights into what is the Word of The Radical Presence for specific moral acts and states of affairs in the here and now. Informing this statement is the claim that words in the Bible are not the *ipsissima verba*, the very words, of The Radical Presence. The Word of the Radical Presence is eternal, omnipresent, uncreated, unbound, and beyond destruction. The Bible, however, is located in time and space, and it can be destroyed. While the Bible is distinct from the Word of The Radical Presence, it, however, plays a critical role in the agent hearing, deciphering, and gaining access to the Word of The Radical Presence. The proposed moral epistemological approach proffers that the direct intervention of The Radical Presence makes it possible for a person to understand and appreciate the data in the Bible, and to hear, decipher, and gain access to the Word of The Radical Presence in order to use it to decide appropriate moral behavior in the twenty-first century.

The proposed moral, epistemological model allows The Radical Presence to help the moral agent to understand that the Word of The Radical Presence is much bigger than a collection of written texts. The Bible is a product of the Word of the Radical Presence, and The Radical Presence uses the Bible to communicate truths to the moral agent. In fact, The Radical Presence and *the* Word of The Radical Presence both antedate the Bible. In fact, the Bible itself clears space for arguing that written texts are not the only means that The Radical Presence uses to communicate with people.

The Psalter says:

The heavens are declaring the glory of God;
And the firmament is proclaiming God's handiwork.
Day to day is pouring forth speech,
And night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words,
Unless their voice is not heard.
Yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world (Ps 19:1-5)²³

Noteworthy, then, is it that the Bible itself indicates that human experience and other phenomena too are conduits by which the agent

²³Translation is mine.

acquires knowledge of truth and receives disclosures from the Radical Presence; consequently, the Bible indicates that it is one and only one source for discerning the voice of the Radical Presence.²⁴

Clark Pinnock's comments about the Bible and the role it plays in helping the agent to perceive the Word of The Radical Presence are helpful, for they articulate tenets about discerning moral truth and hearing the voice of the Radical Presence that has been commonplace in African traditional religions and the Black Pentecostal traditions. Pinnock says: "The Bible should be viewed as part of a larger revelatory work of the Spirit who is always present in the community of faith helping people to interpret God's will for their lives."²⁵ This conceptual framework held by Afro-Pentecostals casts light on a type of allegiance in a specific tradition regarding hermeneutics, moral authority, and moral philosophizing methodology. It is to The Radical Presence not to a text to which the Black Pentecostal moral agent owes allegiance. This proposed pattern for doing ethics has its center in an encounter with The Radical Presence, i.e., being in touch with something bigger and far more precious and powerful than the Bible, as the ultimate source for delineating good and bad deeds. The Bible itself contains a passage that articulates this situation: It says: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor 4:7).²⁶ Allow me to use my Africentric Pentecostal Biblical hermeneutic: Why not think that the treasure is the eternal and limitless Word of the Radical Presence and that the earthen vessel or container is the Bible? The Word of The Radical Presence comes to us through human language, a social convention that is tied to location, culture, and other human phenomena, but the Word of The Radical Presence is the gem, and it antedates the instruments that articulate it to humanity.

Hopefully this article has made some contribution to the conversation on the role that the Bible can play when African-American Pentecostals seek to discover and extract moral norms from the information that it contains and when they attempt to apply responsibly those moral points of view in the Bible to states of affairs and ethical problems on the current scene.

²⁴See Prov 1:7 and Eccl 4:1-2.

²⁵Clark H. Pinnock, "The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," *JPT* 2 (1993): 3-23.

²⁶Translation is mine.

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