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A WOMANIST PERSPECTIVE: BRIDGING THE
BLACK CHURCH AND THE ACADEMY
AMID THE INTERLOCKING OF MEDIA,
PATRIARCHY, AND TELEVANGELISM

Introduction

The writer, as a womanist, interprets the proposed theme, "Bridging the Church and the Academy" with a "hermeneutic of suspicion" due to sexist, classist, racist, homophobic, ageist, and oppressive elements in the Black Church and the academy. A womanist theologian asks: Are the majority of male leaders in the Black Church and the academy suffering from the sin of patriarchy? Is this why they do not inquire about the deaths of Black female children and female adults? Are they caught up in the historical cacophony of "servant-hood theology" in America? Jacquelyn Grant, Calloway Professor of Systematic Theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia, provides insight into the meaning of "servant-hood theology." "Black men are still servants of servants, white women are still servants of servants, and Black women [girls] are still servants of the servants of servants."¹

Are the Black Church and the academy not sending out

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¹Jacquelyn Grant, "The Power of Language and the Language of [Em]Power[ment]," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXI, nos. 1 and 2 (Fall 1993/Spring 1994): 88.

an alarm because the bodies of Black girls and women are negatively stereotyped as breeders and still treated like their sister ancestors during the days of slavery in America? Do the bodies of Black girls and women in the twenty-first century continue to exist as victims living in a cataclysmic residue of racist-and-sexist exploitation?

“. . . Black women [and girls] are servants of the servants of servants.”

This tragic reality invites critical reflection about what James Cone, Systematic Theologian, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, raised two years ago during a public dialogue about the state of the Black Church: “What is the mission of the Black Church today? Has the Black Church lost a good understanding of its mission? The Black Church is good at preaching, good at singing, but what is the Black Church doing to save its people?”²

Would our foreparents be proud of the Black Church of the twenty-first century in America? *Physically enslaved* Black Christians knew their church’s mission—communal salvation—liberation for the oppressed. What then is the mission of the Black Church owned, operated, and pastored by *physically freed* Black women and men of today?

The Black Church in a Media Market-Driven Society

Fast forward to 2005: the Black Church and the academy are trying to survive in a capitalistic media-driven culture. It is time to become proactive about the future of the-

²Live on CSPAN, “The State of the Black Union/Black Church: Relevant, Repressive, or Reborn” (Detroit: Cobo Center, Wayne Hall, February 8, 2003).

ological education. Historically speaking, "the protest mechanisms" of the Civil Rights Movement were born within the Black Church. It is time for the Church and the academy to step outside of their "servant-hood box" and provide theological tools—"protest mechanisms"—for the twenty-first century to educate clergy and lay persons about the controlling, interlocking system of the media, public policy, sexism, racism, and classism in post-modern Christendom.

The Black Church and the academy should create and implement methodologies and curricula that transform negative stereotypical media images: the Black preacher caricatured as a buffoon, Black church choirs used as entertainers for political fundraisers, and Black church sanctuaries and pulpits malformed into sacrilegious stomps along political campaign trails. Why, for instance, do Black preachers receive more airtime during local and national political campaign seasons? After the campaign is over, the American television program culture returns to practice polarized patriarchal theology. Why is the majority of clergypersons with highly celebrated national and global religious broadcasts (including worship services) not persons of color? Why do news agencies, interviewing religious leaders about pressing ethical and theological issues and asking questions about biblical criticism, select academicians and experts who are often white males and females? A study of "Nightline" conducted by FAIR, a media-watch group, showed that from January 1, 1985 to April 30, 1988, 89 percent of all U. S. guests were male and 92 percent were white. "Political, racial, and gender bias go together," said Jeff Cohen, FAIR spokesperson.³ Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki in *The Black Image in the*

³Barbara A. Reynolds, *No! I Won't Shut Up!* (USA: AFJ Publishing, 1998), 33.

White Mind present even more disturbing facts:

The signal of dark skin color is enough to trigger associations among many [w]hites with pollution and danger, even if African Americans dress and speak in a conventionally acceptable manner, employ a restrained verbal style, obtain degrees from Harvard and Yale, and run major corporations, they cannot totally surmount the barrier posed by [w]hites' automatic generalizations from physical traits to moral, behavioral, and intellectual qualities and achievements.

Looking at the 1990-1991 sample, the stories concerning 'Black' issues featured thirty-three Black experts and twenty-seven [w]hites. In those stories about non-Black issues in which Black appeared, [w]hite experts markedly outnumbered Blacks—ninety-four to fifteen. Recall that this subsample consists exclusively of those stories that met our criteria: in other words, that as many as fifteen Black experts appeared in this subsample is due largely to the fact that we looked only at stories in which Blacks played a prominent role. So, within the total sample of 1,980 minutes of network news, Blacks spoke as experts outside the realm of Black-related issues little more than fifteen times, whereas [w]hites were likely quoted more than seven hundred times.⁴

We are in an apathetic state! Spiritual leaders must get the *word* out that releases Black people and all members of

⁴Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 52.

humanity from hegemonic oppression. It is time now for the Black Church and the academy to work together to change the media's negative images and portrayal of the Black Church community. It is time to teach clergy and lay persons to develop strategies for media practitioners and organizations to understand the need to cover substantive religious stories about how the Black Church actually works to transform the community. However, these seminars, workshops, and courses must also emphasize the importance of media ethics—telling both sides of a story. Often information providers tell only one side of a story—thus misleading the general public and sustaining negative cultural and gender images.

It is time for the Black Church and academy to critically review why some Black Christian educators and preachers publicly air their worship services and teach courses on broadcasting venues such as the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), when the owner of CBN, Marion Gordon "Pat" Robertson theologically manipulates suffering women, men, and children of Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, America, and other parts of the globe—in the name of Jesus.

Pat Robertson and Televangelism: A Phenomenological Perspective

Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. . . .In par-

ticular, the programme of phenomenology sought to reinvigorate philosophy by returning to the life of the living subject.⁵

Our investigation necessitates an understanding of Pat Robertson's teleministry and its connection with African dictators—in *the name of Jesus*. Scrutinizing Robertson's "everyday life world,"⁶ the writer discerns that he parlayed the interlocking of Christianity and capitalism in two African countries—Liberia and Zaire. Why would a wealthy Euro-American Christian televangelist become a business partner with Charles Taylor and Mobutu Sese Seko, rich tyrannical African dictators? Perhaps this is due to Robertson's ability to understand how historically patriarchal European and American religious and business leaders could create a partnership with African tyrants, thereby securing economic success and political domination.

Engaging Alfred Schutz's "social phenomenological methodology"⁷ and the conceptual presupposition of Paul Ricoeur's "symbols give rise to thought"⁸ provide the writer the frame for a womanist "hermeneutic of suspicion." Schutz's methodology presupposes that Robertson's phenomenological motives cannot be measured by the traditional realm of behavioral sciences, since these are not deduced calculated responses derived from psychology, sociology, or anthropol-

⁵Dermont Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 45.

⁶See Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World*, vol. 1 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 15.

⁷See Schutz, *Structures*, chap. 1, [3] – 20.

⁸Anthony C. Thiselton, "Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur," in *Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 531.

ogy. Robertson's life-world is a result of his active engagement in the contextual interpretation of his political and religious experiences.

The life-world, understood in its totality as natural and social world, is the arena, as well as what sets the limits, of my and our reciprocal action. In order to actualize our goals, we must master what is present in them and transform them. . . . The life-world is thus a reality which we modify through our acts. . . which [in turn] modifies our actions. We can say that our natural attitude of daily life is pervasively determined by a pragmatic motive.⁹

Perhaps Robertson's "pragmatic motive" is identified by Schutz's presupposition as a "stratified social and cultural world. . . historically pre-given as a frame of reference for me and my fellow-men, indeed in a manner as taken for granted as the 'natural world.'"¹⁰ Possibly the relationship between Robertson, Mobutu Sese Seko, and Charles Taylor developed due to "fellow-men" knowing how to create partnerships with dictators (with each other). These persons' "province of reality"¹¹ consisted of stratified historical cultural objects: Christianity, slavery, oppression, deception, and capitalism. The intersubjectivity of these cultural objects in the hands of these oppressors allowed them to engage in what their senses perceived to be natural social relationships.

Was this Robertson's "pragmatic motive" for instructing

⁹Schutz, *Structures*, 6.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹*Ibid.*

Christian members of his television ministry to give CBN money to save the lives of Rwandan refugees while receiving permission from Mobutu to mine diamonds in Zaire, the land where Rwandan refugees were trying to escape? It is reported that Mobutu plundered and lived off of Zaire's \$300 million a year diamond business.¹² According to *Africa Forum*, Mobutu's rule "left the mineral-rich country in economic shambles."¹³ In 1984, it was estimated that "Mobutu's personal fortune was nearly \$4.1 billion (U. S. currency)"¹⁴ and that it was stored in Swiss banks. At one point, his personal wealth was equivalent to the monetary amount Zaire owed foreign countries during the same period. Is it then a coincidence that this African dictator and the Euro-American televangelist contextualized actions in their "everyday life-worlds"? Did their actions come from "a stock of previous experience and stock of knowledge as explained by Schutz?"

In relation to other provinces of reality with finite meaning-structure, the everyday life-world is the primary reality. . . . I share this reality with other men with whom I have in common not only goals but means for the actualization of these goals. I influence other men and they influence me. We act together. The everyday-life world is that reality in which reciprocal understanding is possible."¹⁵

¹²Andrew Purvis, "Jewels for Jesus," *Time*, 20 February 1994, 30.

¹³de Baptista, "Once upon a Time in Africa: There Was 'Mobutu Sese Seko,'" [article online] (Paris, France: Jeune Afrique, l'Intelligent Group, 1988, accessed 22 February 2005); available from <http://www.africaforum.com/showthread.php3?threadid=1571>; Internet.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Schutz, *Structures*, 35.

Mobutu and Robertson acted together. Even though they lived on different continents, each of them based their knowledge on the historic exploitative interlocking relationship of Christianity and private enterprise. Did the native-born African (Mobutu) exploit his country's natural resources, torture his people, and allow the Euro-American televangelist and businessman (Robertson) to pilfer the diamonds and lumber of his native soil (an African country) because he had the same "pragmatic motive" as Robertson? Possibly this can be elucidated as Mobutu's common goal to become a financially wealthy male citizen to avoid any form of oppression. Or did Robertson and he, confessing faith in God, decide to *manipulate the faith language and practice of Christianity* and use it as a foundation to implement a scheme to filch an African country of its natural resources and steal from that country's poor women, children, and men to make the rich richer—especially themselves? Is there a theological explanation for the repetitive history of greed, selfishness, and inequity that manifest itself in the actions of patriarchal-racist-imperialistic religious/business leaders in America, Europe, and Africa? Schutz's theory is thus affirmed:

I trust that the world as it has been known by me up until now will continue further and that consequently the stock of knowledge obtained from my fellow-men and formed from my own experiences will continue to preserve its fundamental validity. . . . From this assumption follows the further and fundamental one: that I can repeat my past successful acts.¹⁶

¹⁶Ibid., 7.

In the Name of Jesus?

The emergence of televangelism's personality cults should cause seminaries, churches, and denominations to take seriously the need for religious leaders who are effective communicators. Although personality cults can easily corrupt leaders and their followers, the charisma that enables them to form is not inherently evil. . . . Gifted leaders, whether in civil rights movements or religious revivals, can help people transcend the limitations of individual hopelessness and powerlessness. When those leaders have integrity, they authentically express the legitimate desires of needy people, not their own selfish yearnings. Personality cults are unfortunate perversions of the inherently human quest for authority.¹⁷

African theologian, John S. Mbiti, clarified the historic imperialistic *past successful acts* of the interlocking racist and classist *modified actions* of Pat Robertson and Mobutu Sese Seko. Mbiti said, "European and American control over Africa is mainly economic and ecclesiastical with the subtle influence of the mass media."¹⁸ The interlocking of the mass media, capitalism, and religious influence is a social phenomenological tool used to preserve oppressive institutionalized actions in the social setting of the everyday life-world.

The following are examples of Robertson and Mobutu

¹⁷Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 95.

¹⁸John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990), 213.

using the understated influential scheme of televangelism to protect the *fundamental validity* of the neo-imperialistic interlocking relationship between Christianity and free enterprise to maintain control over Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of Congo) in Africa.

Originally, Zaire was the Republic of Congo, but Mobutu Sese Seko (formerly known as army general, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu) overthrew the government leader, placed the Republic of Congo under military control and renamed the country Zaire. In 1994, Robertson asked CBN viewers to give donations to support "Operation Blessing." The engaging televangelist told his Christian viewers their money would help the CBN to pay for a "Flying Hospital" plane, which would be used to transport missionaries and medical personnel to treat Rwandan refugees and spread the gospel of Jesus. An article in *Time* revealed:

The association of dictator and preacher began with a Robertson relief group, Operation Blessing, a branch of which has botched a corn-cultivation project on a 50,000-acre farm outside the capital, Kinshasa. Last year during the Rwandan refugee crisis, Operation Blessing expanded its humanitarian efforts to Goma but was criticized for spending too much money on transportation, pulling its workers out too soon and proselytizing. 'They were laying on hands,' an American aid worker recalls, 'speaking in tongues and holding services while people were dying all around.' Many relief agencies are notorious for mismanagement and backbiting, but even considering that, Operation Blessing drew a considerable volume of negative reviews from fellow Samaritans.¹⁹

¹⁹Purvis, "Jewels," 30.

Three years later in 1997, two pilots for "Operation Blessing" indicated that from September 1994 until February 1995 planes purchased with money of CBN viewers were used to transport diamond mining equipment and to support supplies for workers of the African Development Corporation (ADC) in Zaire.²⁰ Televangelist Robertson was the president and sole stockholder of ADC. During this time, Robertson informed his devoted Christian television congregation—as believers in God—their money was needed to promote CBN's assistance of the helpless people in Zaire.

In contradiction, Robertson and Mobutu professed faith in the God of the "least of these." Both were two of the wealthiest men in the world. But did they offer money from their personal bank accounts to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or provide for widows of Africa, the United States (or any other part of the globe)? The social phenomenological look at the style of the lived experience in the everyday life-world of Mobutu (the tyrant) and Robertson (the calculating televangelist) supports Schutz's presupposition: "I influence other men and they influence me. We can act together."²¹ Each person stands in mutual relation to others, a member of a social structure into which one is born or which one has joined, which existed before and will so afterward.

After the death of Mobutu Sese Seko, Pat Robertson befriended Charles Taylor, the corrupt and intimidating president of Liberia, resulting in the stratified social structure of the interlocking of westernized Christianity and private enterprise in an economically depressed African country.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Schutz, *Structures*, 35.

Schutz posits:

A fellow man's behavior is not, if you will, a spatiotemporal event, but rather action 'like mine.' That is to say, it is imbedded for them in meaning-contexts and is subjectively motivated and articulated purposely according to their particular interests and according to what is feasible for them. Normally, in the natural attitude we 'know' what it is that another is doing, why he does it, and why he does it now and under these circumstances.²²

It appears that Robertson, the fundamentalist televangelist/businessman, consistently embraced the influential cultural objects of Christianity, capitalism, and the medium of television. In addition to Liberia being in a state of political chaos and described as "an economic basket case," perhaps Robertson communicated his past actions with Zaire's dictator to Charles Taylor, the president of Liberia. And perchance these "fellow men," agreed to pursue particular interests in the context of "social relations in their province of reality." As a result, "Jesus mania swept Liberia," and, simultaneously, Robertson created Freedom Gold Limited (an offshore company in the Cayman Islands) although reportedly Freedom Gold's business office operated in the CBN headquarters in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Liberian president, Charles Taylor, and key Liberian cabinet members signed an agreement with Robertson, allowing the for-profit Freedom Gold to explore and receive mining rights in southeastern Liberia, where gold was believed to be in the ground.

²²Ibid., 15.

What do Robertson's and Taylor's modified actions signify within the milieu of Paul Ricoeur's concept "symbols give rise to thought"? Maybe a description of Pat Robertson's and Charles Taylor's behavior in the "meaning context" of their province of reality will give insight into the intersubjectivity of their natural and social world. Let us consider the example of the "Jesus mania that swept Liberia":

For eight nights last December the nation's TV channels—both of them—simultaneously showed programs created by Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcast Network. There was the Prodigal Son parable told from a Nigerian point of view; animated Bible episodes; stories about people who said they'd had out-of-body experiences and come face to face with the Almighty; and the true tale of a Mexican family who stayed together thanks to God. For two nights the stations simply broadcast testimonials from Liberians detailing Jesus' role in their lives. Those without televisions (the vast majority of the country) could catch the same fare at local "video clubs"—converted storefronts where people paid the equivalent of a few pennies to gather around a TV and VCR.²³

Impoverished children, women, and men living in the war-torn country of Liberia paid pennies to watch Pat Robertson's editorially controlled and manipulated video production of a westernized Jesus in the lives of the people of Liberia. According to *Fortune's* Daniel Roth:

²³Daniel Roth, "Pat Robertson's Quest for Eternal Life," *Fortune*, 10 June 2002, 132.

In February, at a national three-day prayer and fast rally partially funded by Robertson, Liberia's President—a U. S. prison escapee who, according to Human Rights Watch, has run 'the whole gamut of human rights abuses'—declared he had seen the light: 'We in Liberia recognize that there is a higher authority,' said Charles Taylor, decked out in a short sleeved white suit and standing on a red-carpeted stage at the center of the Samuel K. Doe stadium in Monrovia. 'I'm not your President. Jesus is!' He instructed the estimated 65,000 people in the crowd to prostrate themselves and join in song that he would lead despite his position—face down on the carpet. As the rally ended, Taylor presented a ceremonial plate to an American preacher named John Gimenez who helped organize the event. 'Thank you,' Taylor said, 'Tell Pat Robertson and please present this to him as a token of our appreciation.'

About 190 miles away, in a densely forested region of Liberia called Bukon Jedeh, Robertson's employees were busy working on a much more valuable token of Taylor's appreciation. There a crew of 35 Liberians were digging deep holes into the red, claylike soil on a plot of land contracted out to Robertson. Their goal was to uncover the spot, beneath the gravel and laterite, that they believed held five million ounces of the stuff that the Book of Revelation says lines the streets of heaven: pure gold. Gold that if sold on the open market could reap about \$1.5 billion.²⁴

Robertson and Taylor's actions exemplify a double mean-

²⁴Ibid.

ing of greed and deception *in the name of Jesus* and create a fundamental structure for Ricoeur's theory, "symbols give rise to thought." What does the interlocking of westernized Christianity and capitalism symbolize in *Pat Robertson's everyday life-world of televangelism*? It appears this Euro-American televangelist was allowed by U. S. governmental and religious leaders to develop a business relationship with African dictators. *Pat Robertson's everyday life-world of televangelism* consists of numerous intersubjective cultural objects that include Christianity, politics, history, private enterprise, and hegemony. This province of reality experienced by Robertson, Mobutu, and Taylor created a social phenomena, motivating the following question: Is the interlocking of exploitation and televangelism an effective global communication tool for teaching the essence of God's unconditional love?

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, the writer affirmed a "hermeneutic of suspicion" firmly entrenched within the socially/politically/economically challenged context of the Black community for the twenty-first century. Our theme, "Bridging the Church and the Academy," exemplifies this "suspicion" due to a variety of oppressed elements. Within the tragic hegemonic context of the interlocking of media, religiosity, patriarchy, sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, devious private enterprise, oppression, internal oppression, the redaction of history, and calculating televangelism programming under the pretext of "in the name of Jesus"—*now is the time for members of the Black Church and academy to bridge the gap, unite, and develop a critical proactive holistic vision because our mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, sisters, and brothers are dying—our community is perishing.*