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## Cutting The Cheese A Different Way: Ethics, Hermeneutics, And The Black Experience

### Introduction

For the past five centuries we have lived in a theological age, described by some as the age of modernity. In this age people of color have been dominated by a pejorative Eurocentrism which tends to take a one-sided approach to theological scholarship, and particularly to hermeneutics and ethics. From a Black frame of reference one observes that such an age has become increasingly marked by discursive rationality and an unholy arrogance rooted in centuries of White male privilege and power. Ethically, it is not simply the moral problematic of the arrogance of power. It is rather the power of arrogance masquerading as the *summum bonum*, the highest good for all people.

In the critically acclaimed book, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Thomas Hoyt cogently argues that many Eurocentric scholars who reflect their own cultural preferences do not provide the only perspective or even the most

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useful perspective for interpreting Scripture.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to point out—and I think rightly so—that African American, Latin American, Asian American and feminist theologians and ethicists have all emphasized that the text *per se*, is not the only focus for biblical interpretation; indeed, the cultural ethos, the interpreter, and the text must all be examined.<sup>2</sup> In the critical socio-ethical tradition of Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and C. Eric Lincoln, we are reminded that the cultural context shapes both text and interpreter. While the historical-critical method, positively considered, has served as a hedge against the charge of biblical literalism and fundamentalism, contemporary scholars have not gone far enough, i.e., there is a need to read the words of the text in light of the divergent scripts of the culture. These divergent scripts refer to alternative voices of the dominant or host culture. It is too obvious to suggest that various themes, typologies, and life-experiences help to shape the organizing principle of the biblical exegete. For example, some biblical scholars and Christian thinkers seem to interpret the text based on deeply personal and introspective experience. Soren Kirkegaard and Friedrich Schleiermacher are cases in point. Other interpretive modes emphasize unconditional agapeism and spiritual pilgrimage. The personalities of St. Augustine and Howard Thurman immediately come to mind. For others,

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Hoyt, Jr., "Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Tradition," in Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 24-25ff. The corpus of scholarly literature on the importance of the Bible and biblical interpretation in the Black Church experience is growing rapidly. Black theologians such as James H. Cone and Major J. Jones, and womanist ethicists such as Katie G. Cannon and Emilie M. Townes have been pushing back the frontiers of biblical interpretation, seeking to be attentive to hermeneutical strategies that can speak to the moral questions and cultural dilemmas of racism and sexism. Cannon argues, for example, that certain ideological notions informed slaveholding apologists. Among these were views of slaves as sub-human and destined to be "hewers of wood and drawers of water." See, Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972, 1974).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.



especially for secular-pluralists, the Bible seems to function primarily as a verbal icon whose power "has little to do with the *content* of ancient Scripture but much to do with the *form* of modern American life."<sup>3</sup>

Now the main ethical problem for many of these classical and contemporary modes of biblical interpretation is the fact that they tend to ignore or exclude the Afrocentric religious experience. It is my fundamental thesis, therefore, that an ethically viable biblical hermeneutic must *cut the cheese a different way* in light of the suffering and degradation of Blacks and other minorities excluded from full participation in American society.

Here we may critically ask what is the use of the Bible in ethical discourse? What sort of authority is the Bible in the formation of the Christian moral life? Let us now turn to consideration of these ethical concerns of believers.

### Ethics and the Use of the Bible

The first use of the Bible in the day-to-day life and faith of the Church has to do with perspective. What I mean by "perspective" in this context has to do the whole matter of how we see, what we see—the issue of how we discern what God is doing in our lives, in the Church, and in the world. Perspective is the telescope through which we view God's action in the world. It is the window through which we seek to understand and interpret our world. Metaphorically, the Bible is that telescope; the Bible is that

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<sup>3</sup>Martin E. Marty, *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p. 153. Sociologically considered, Marty observes that while 93% of Americans believe in God and the Bible, and 87% of Whites confess to occasional prayer, few people are familiar with the content of Scripture. Hence, the iconographic function of the Bible is evident in legitimating prevailing social customs and values rather than forming people into a community of faith. See also, T.E. McCollough, *The Moral Imagination and Public Life* (New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1991).

angle of vision from which we decide the issues of life and death. Therefore, the Bible itself is not a mere collection of interesting stories that we may choose to like or dislike, to affirm or deny in a given time and place. It is nothing less than the redemptive story of grace and truth revealed in the One many Black preachers call the "lily of the valley" and the "bright and morning star!"

A second use of the Bible in the life and faith of the Church, has to do with the increase of authority. The Bible is the redeeming power and authority of God in and over the community of faith whose center is Jesus Christ. The authority of the Bible is all about the story of the One who was sent as a liberating agent in history. "Jesus Christ is his name; liberation is his game!" Moreover, the authority of the Bible for the moral life comes down, at least in practical terms, to the acceptance of Jesus Christ as liberator, the divine promise of justice and mercy, and the reader's internalization of biblical stories as true in the search for the good life. Thus, without acceptance of the authority of the living Word of God disclosed in the Bible, the book itself becomes merely "another great piece of literature" in our educational repertoire.

We may simply ask, "What is the relationship between Scripture and ethics for communities of faith whose history is marked by the valley of suffering and the mountain of hope?" What moral authority does the Bible hold for Christian witness and action? The Bible is what it has always been: a book containing God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The Bible, in the context of the believing community, is not a book primarily about ancient history, philosophy, archaeology, or some fossilized period from the distant past. The Bible is a book about us—a covenant and a pilgrim people. A people of the Way who know the meaning of exile and the promise of deliverance. The Bible is a book of life-giving stories about God's relationship to us, to creation, and to the Church of Jesus Christ in the world. It has authority for the moral



life and for Christian witness to the power of the Gospel only because we believe and accept the stories of biblical faith as our stories.

A third use of the Bible in the community of faith is that it gives us moral directives.<sup>4</sup> There are principles of the living Word that can guide the behavior and shape the conduct of believers, (e.g., the Decalogue, and the dual love commandment). The "law of love" is perceived by Christians to be a pivotal guiding principle for interpretation of what is right and wrong in human society. Hence, the actions of individuals and groups may be said to be morally right if they conform to the law of love, and morally wrong if found to be in violation of the principle of love. Yet the law of love is never a simple possibility when dealing with the dialectics of sin and grace, righteousness and unrighteousness, oppression and hope in human society.

### Understanding the Ethical Task

For Christian social ethics, the Bible remains—as we have seen—the normative source and charter document for the moral life. But the starting point for understanding the ethical task begins with the foundational question: "What does an ethicist do?"

It is my judgment that out of the critical matrix of faith-sharing and biblical interpretation, the job of the ethicist is to try to analyze and understand who and what people are, when they are behaving socially, in the light of certain prescribed standards of right and wrong. Accordingly, the task of the ethicist is to reflect normatively on what is, with a keen eye on what ought to be.

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<sup>4</sup>Enoch H. Oglesby, *Clues From God's Divine Arithmetic: Christian Ethics for Preaching and Evangelism* (Nashville: Town-send Press, 1985), pp. 107-109ff.

For those who call themselves children of God, the perceived marriage between "what is" and "what ought to be" is never a simple possibility of logic or conscience. Thus I contend that any viable understanding of the ethical task must be grounded in the divine indicative rather than the divine imperative. To use the ethico-theological language of Paul Lehmann, the primary question is "What does God do?" The stuff of Christian faith teaches us that God is active in history: in the particular contexts, stories, experiences, hopes, and struggles of people to bring sense out of the tragic contradictions of life. For the moral agent, this God who is active in history is made known to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, discerning the ethical task means knowing the pivotal links between each informing discipline in the life and faith of the Church of Jesus Christ. In understanding the ethical task for North America churches, three brief comments seem appropriate.

First, understanding the ethical task in the community of faith means "speaking the truth" about the realities of oppression and the need for divine liberation. With few exceptions, Black theologians and Christian ethicists point out that White scholars and moral thinkers in America have failed to ground their biblical interpretation of the human predicament in an analysis of God's liberating activity. It seems to me, therefore, that the burden of the ethical task is to "speak the truth" about the doing of ethics on the contemporary American scene and its tendency to separate the politics of God from the politics of oppression. Hence, the burden of the ethical task involves nothing less than *speaking the truth to power*. "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers . . ." (Eph. 6:12).

Secondly, understanding the ethical task involves "speaking the truth with love." The norm of love is the highest virtue of Christian ethics. It is legitimated within the faithful Christian community by the doing of justice, feeding the hungry, clothing the



naked, and redistributing wealth and power. Normatively, the task of "speaking the truth with love" aims at the establishment of justice and righteousness on behalf of the poor and oppressed in the land. Jesus reminded his disciples that love must be the motivation of moral action. He asserted, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind." In short, the individual person who is faithful to the ethical task discerns the close connection between love and the struggle for justice and freedom.

### Invisibility and the Black Condition

From a socio-historical viewpoint, Vincent Harding, in his book, *There is a River*, points out that Black people were brought to this country in chains and completely cut off from their traditional religion and ancestral past. Individually, therefore, the Black person was robbed of his or her language, art-form, and other aspects of culture. With a strange twist of irony, the Black person was forbidden to be an "African" and prevented from becoming an "American." Notwithstanding the fact that the defining reality of early America was Puritanism, with its strong biblical and so-called Christian orientation for the individual and the community, the Black individual could only exist in the status of an "outsider." In the dominant culture, such a person, the "outsider," represented invisibility. Ralph Ellison, in the prologue to his 1947 book, *Invisible Man*, expresses the texture of this condition in the following manner:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids — and I

might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you sometimes see in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.<sup>5</sup>

*Cutting the cheese a different way* is a metaphor which implies that biblical hermeneutics must take seriously the dialectics of the Black experience in America as a legitimate point of theological inquiry. Up to the early decade of the 1960s, the religious experiences of African Americans were almost totally excluded from mainstream Protestant seminaries in the United States, thereby relegating their critical contribution to biblical scholarship to the status of “invisibility.” For example, C. Shelby Rooks’, *Revolution in Zion*, underscores the fact that in 1960 only five White seminaries had any African American faculty at all (i.e., Drew, Garrett, Pittsburgh, University of Chicago and Wesley).<sup>6</sup> At the time, and to some degree currently, biblical scholars and

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<sup>5</sup>Cited in Charles Shelby Rooks, *Revolution in Zion* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990), p. 91. Ralph Ellison is regarded by many Afrocentric scholars as a major literary figure. Yet his achievements are virtually unknown by many White liberal Protestant theologians and biblical scholars. Thus proving the main thrust of his novel. His celebrated contemporary, James Arthur Baldwin, left America in 1948 for a ten year self-imposed exile in Paris. *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1953) and *Notes of a Native Son*, both deal with the irony and promise of Black life despite a racist culture bent upon making the Black individual “invisible.”

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91.



seminary administrators of the normative culture thought that the African American religious experience had no real merit for serious academic study.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the Black condition in America was increasingly marked not only by the brutalizing force of racial prejudice, but also by the “systemic invisibility” and vulnerability universally experienced by Christians of African descent. Sadly, the upshot of this scenario—relative to biblical hermeneutics and Christian witness—is the fact that most of our seminaries prepare persons to minister largely to middle class, White Protestant congregations, and once again, African Americans are excluded from, or have limited access to such ministries. Notwithstanding, *cutting the cheese a different way* implies reading the “script” or “story” of the Bible through the lens of one’s own socio-cultural experience.

### Back-Bush Hermeneutics

The term *back-bush* hermeneutic is refers to the “praxis-liberating activity” of God in the struggle to set free the oppressed—and in this discussion, especially Blacks and other people of color in the United States—who labor against the perennial yoke of racism.

Etymologically, the term “Hermeneutics” (coming from a Greek verb meaning “to make clear”) simply connotes the science of interpreting texts. Whenever the moral agent, for example, begins to speak about the God of the Bible or the Living Word of Yahweh, one is engaging in a hermeneutical exercise—with a particular hermeneutical slant toward the moral assumptions and values of the *cultus*.

The reality of a *back-bush* hermeneutics is its desire to speak

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<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91ff.

to the pain, suffering, and deep yearnings of hurting people in our global community: women, children, the disabled and disadvantaged, African-Americans and Hispanics, and other people of color who are often forced by overt and systemic injustice to live at the ragged edges of survival. These are the people referred to by Professor Gustavo Gutierrez as the "marginalized poor" caught up in the dialectics of the underside of history. *Back-bush* hermeneutic is, therefore, grassroots in character. As employed by persons of faith and conscience, *back-bush* hermeneutics is symbolic of the African concept of *Ujamaa*. This Swahili word means "familyhood" or "pulling-together" at the grassroots level of human life. In the Afrocentric religious consciousness, *Ujamaa* embodies the heart and soul of a *back-bush* hermeneutic. Such a notion in the modern world of biblical interpretation seeks truth and affirmation of the "otherness" of humanity against the brutalizing forces of greed, crass materialism, and a false piety in American Protestant Christianity that often masquerades as the ultimate good.

Ethically considered, I must point out that *back-bush* hermeneutics does not seek, existentially, a posture which allows us—in the language of William James—"to lobby in the courts of the Almighty for special favors." No! What it seeks in reality is a basic trust in God which says: "Come what will, come what may, I'll still trust in the Lord!"

I use the term *back-bush* hermeneutics in a more concrete sense to refer to a cross-cultural strategy for understanding and interpreting the faith which Black folk hold as members of the Body of Christ. It is an angle of vision that invites the theological educator or moral scholar to move beyond the classical mode of "diachronic hegemony" that is indicative of prevailing biblical



interpretation to the "synchronic complexities of social location,"<sup>8</sup> In this way the deep stories of faith are made to connect with the daily realities of suffering humanity. Mark Taylor rightly calls this new phenomenon a "critical pluralism" that is inclusive of religio-cultural differences rather than in spite of such differences.<sup>9</sup> In the first place, therefore, a *back-bush* hermeneutic understands the use of the Bible as both "authoritative" and "formative" for the Christian moral life in the world. For the ethically sensitive Christian, this means that the fact of understanding God's commandments can never be separated from the fact of obeying and keeping God's moral law as *authoritative* over human life. I think, however, that neither are simple possibilities. For example, the ethical dictum in Micah 6 is binding upon all people, both the oppressors and the oppressed, in terms of the contextuality of the moral law:

God has told you what is good;  
and what is it that the Lord asks of you?  
Only to act justly, to love loyalty,  
to walk wisely before your God.<sup>10</sup>

In the second place, to a Black Christian ethicist, *Cutting the cheese a different way* means using the structure of moral imagination to get at the truth of the Bible and unmasking the scandal of the Gospel. The power of the scandal of the Gospel is in its ability to set the oppressed free. Many ethicists and biblical scholars of an Afrocentric orientation agree that the religious experience of the African slave in America was itself based on the

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<sup>8</sup>Mark K. Taylor, "Celebrating Difference, Resisting Domination: The Need for Synchronic Strategies in Theological Education," in B.G. Wheeler and E. Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 269.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 268-271.

<sup>10</sup>Micah 6:8.

Bible, with particular reference to Yahweh's liberating activity in delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage. Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth, spoke the word of deliverance through his servant Moses when he proclaimed:

I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.<sup>11</sup>

As heirs of the Divine Promise, African American Christians endured the horrors of chattel slavery in the United States as a dark night of the soul. They called upon a God who hears and answers prayer! The genius of a back-bush hermeneutic, therefore, filled Black people with the moral rage to cry out to Yahweh, "Let my people go!" Indeed, evidence of this agonizing cry on the part of oppressed Black people can be seen in the eschatological elements of the Negro Spiritual.<sup>12</sup>

In the third place, I would suggest that in the final analysis *cutting the cheese a different way* means refusing to accept the oppressor's definition of Black humanity: whether that oppressor be Black or White, Brown or Yellow. It should be noted that during the long night of chattel slavery in U.S. history when—in the words of James Weldon Johnson—"hope unborn had died," there were courageous men and women of faith like David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet

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<sup>11</sup>Exodus 6:6-7 (New RSV).

<sup>12</sup>See, James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 34-38.



Tubman, who resisted the White oppressor's definition of their humanity. These leaders and moral agents of the faith marched to the beat of a different drum as they led effective Black political resistance movements against the demonic forces of racism and Anglo-Saxon domination.

The Underground Railroad, of which Harriet Tubman was a conductor and was affectionately known as Black Moses, is a case in point. Harriet Tubman set out for freedom one day by literally walking off of her white master's plantation in Maryland—with little or no thought of the danger or the impact that this one solitary act of courage would have on hundreds of slaves. Today, biblical scholars and ethical theologians of the Black experience agree that Tubman was led by nothing less than the mighty hand of God in her determination to taste and make available to others the sweet fruit of freedom!

Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings, in their book *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives*, sum up rather nicely what it means to *cut the cheese a different way*. They make the point that for slaves, the overarching socio-political message of the Bible was crystal clear: authentic religious experience means *freedom*, nothing more, nothing less. They emphatically assert:

... Slaves employed both individual and collective courage to pursue their God-given free humanity through the resistance of politics against the wickedness of the slave masters.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 36ff.

In any event, the biblical exegete who is faithful to the sociological particularity of Black suffering will always “cut the cheese” in the direction of historical freedom. The old Negro Spiritual has indelibly impressed this truth upon many generations of Black believers.

○ freedom! ○ freedom!  
○ freedom over me!  
An' before I'd be a slave,  
I'll be buried in my grave,  
and go home to my Lord an' be free.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>See, Cone, *op. cit.*, p. 44ff.