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## Womanist Theology In North America

I've been asked to share what I have been doing in the area of women and theology, and more specifically, Black women and theology, from the perspective that we call Womanist Theology.

"Sexism is not a problem in the Black Community." "Sexism is not a problem in the African community." These statements, echoed by many, were the basis of an informal discussion just a few days ago at the Bossey Institute just outside Geneva, Switzerland, by myself and a Kenyan graduate student from Princeton Theological Seminary. We began the discussion by sharing our experiences as women in Religious Studies, African American Religious Studies and African Religious Studies.

The discussion took on an interesting turn when the graduate student from Kenya shared her experience of coming to Princeton for Ph.D. studies. (She was the only African woman student in religious studies that I knew of, at that time. There is presently another at Northwestern University.) She shared with me her experience of the application process. This included the difficulty of getting admitted not only by the Admissions Office at Princeton, but of receiving endorsement by her church in Kenya. The church authorities determined that it would not be good for her to pursue doctoral studies. In fact, more specifically, they decided that it would not be good for her *marriage*. They did not consult her, neither did they consult her husband, who was in complete support of her pursuit of doctoral studies, but they decided among themselves that it would create too

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much of a strain on her marriage and family life. This, of course, made for a fascinating exchange between the two of us. The incident underscores the fallacy in the statement that sexism does not exist in our two respective communities. I could have told her similar stories that demonstrate equally that the African American community has *not* escaped sexism. For example, it is still not uncommon for women candidates for ministry to be asked "What does your husband feel about you being in the ministry?" It is reasonable to inquire of the spouse's response to one's vocation. However, it is unreasonable when the question is inequitably applied — that is when it has become a woman's question. The discrimination is at two levels: (1) only women candidates are asked the question, thereby empowering men (their husbands) to participate in their plans for ministry and (2) the wives of male candidates are not consulted — they are in fact ignored, essentially made impotent, allowing them no participation in the plans for ministry of their husbands. In both instances, men are empowered and women are disenfranchised in the African American community.

We can attest to various events and happenings in both communities that challenge the misconceptions about sexism in the African and African American communities. My work over the last few years has been focused in the area that we are calling Womanist Theology. Womanist Theology is a theological perspective that emerges out of the experiences of Black women. These experiences include not only Black women's activities in the larger society, but also in the churches. It emphasizes the fact that Black women have often rejected oppressive structures in the church and the larger society. These experiences provide a context conducive to doing theology. They have been and continue to be defined by racism, sexism and classism and, therefore, offer a unique opportunity and a new challenge for developing a relevant perspective in theology. Womanist theology draws from the life experiences of some Black women who have contributed meaningful interpretations of the Christian faith.

Black women must do theology out of the tri-dimensional experience

of racism, sexism and classism, as well as oppression in many other forms which affect the lives of Black women. To ignore any dimension of this problem is to ignore the holistic and integrated reality of Black womanhood. When Black women say that God is on the side of the oppressed, we mean that God is in solidarity with what goes on in the underside of history; those whose lives are bent and broken from the many assaults perpetrated against them.

What then are some of the presuppositions of this perspective, Womanist Theology? First, that we live in a patriarchal society. Womanist Theology recognizes the fact that many cultures are indeed patriarchal. In these cultures sexism renders women at best, second class citizens. Sexism violates the humanity and the basic dignity of women. A Black American woman's reality is even more complicated. Certainly women of the dominant society can afford to combat sexism and sexism alone, but Black women and other Third World women have more complicated experiences that cannot be described only in terms of sexism. Their experiences must be at least *tri-dimensional* for their realities are impacted by racism, sexism and classism, and other forms of oppression, all of which must be addressed. Consequently, in light of this complicated existence, the Black woman's experience can more adequately be described as "being *under* the underside of history."

Secondly, Womanist Theology affirms the struggle for the eradication of racism wherever it is found. In the struggles against racism, women are in solidarity with oppressed men even as we continue to raise the question of sexism. Moreover, whereas Black women share the racial oppression of Black men, wherever they are found, the added dimensions of Black women's oppression means that there needs to be special or added attention to our challenge in the theological arena. When we look at the larger Black movement, the Black civil rights movement and the origins of Black Theology, we recognize the fact that though women were always present, representing a significantly high proportion of movement participants, we were rarely given the recognition that men customarily received. The same

is true in the Church, though women are the majority, in terms of membership, they are reduced to a minority in the leadership of the Church. What this means, however, is that as the Church engaged in struggles against racial oppression women were always there.

Womanist Theology seeks, then, to revise history, including Black religious history. It seeks to unearth those experiences of women's engagement in the struggle against racism that, because of patriarchal structures, have been ignored. So it was out of our involvement in the Black movement and our involvement in the feminist movement, that Black women decided that their voice needed to be heard. Certainly the larger women's movement was beginning to address many of the issues that are common to all women as women, but we felt that historically Black women had been systematically left out of the critical stages of the women's movement in the United States and Europe.

Thirdly, Womanist Theology not only reflects upon the struggle for the eradication of racism, but it is thoroughly grounded in the struggles to eliminate sexism from our communication and from the larger community. However, as women functioning in organizations recognizing the peculiar and more complicated nature of women's existence, we argue that Black and other Third World women operate under the underside of "*herstory*." This is simply to say that Black women's and Third World women's realities historically have been the experience of being servants of servants, of having been slaves of servants.

It has not been uncommon to hear that the feminist movement is indeed a white movement and, more specifically, a white middle class movement. Black women, therefore, began to discuss our own experiences as necessary for doing our own theology. We identified with the term Womanist when it emerged in Alice Walker's writings, simply because the term represents an experience that is familiar to most, if not all, Black women. It comes from Black folk culture and was historically a negative expression. To be "womanish" was certainly not an ideal attribution. So

Walker took a historically negative term and turned it into something positive. Womanish became converted to womanist, referring to being serious and courageous. It pointed to serious Black women, courageous Black women, bold Black women. Today theology is one of the areas in which the significance of this becomes clear. There are two basic perspectives. One is that this way of doing theology brings visibility to a people who have been historically invisible. The second is that it gives such people a voice and a (theological) vote.

For the most part, Black women have historically been invisible and it is no less true that in the women's movement they have continued to be invisible. The womanist perspective, therefore, aids us in bringing into speech a group of people who have been rendered speechless or voiceless. This must be accomplished in terms of power and power relationships. Certainly there have always been exceptions to the rules and there have been Black women who have spoken in spite of the fact that an attempt was made to render them speechless. One thinks of the Harriet Tubmans, the Sojourner Truths, the Jarena Lees, and the Maria Stewards, the Fannie Lou Hamers, and the Marian Andersons. To be sure, all of these women have been exceptions to the general rule. Womanist theology makes it a special concern to take seriously the experiences of these and the thousands of unheralded, oppressed Black women who have rich experiences that provide significant data for doing theology.

In conclusion we can say that Womanist Theology sees as its basic point of departure, the eradication of racism, classism and sexism. At this conference it is particularly important to note that an informal dialogue is emerging between African American women and African women. In this last decade of the 20th century we see the need for these two groups of women on either side of the Atlantic to deal with those issues that affect women as women. Womanist Theology offers a potentially powerful context for this emerging collaboration.