FEATURE ARTICLE

The Tolton Lecture is integral to Augustus Tolton Week celebrated at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. The February 28, 2007, lecture was a joint presentation by Dr. Stephanie Y. Mitchem and Dr. Michelle A. Gonzalez.

PART ONE

Womanist Theology

Looking to the Future

Stephanie Y. Mitchem

Looking at the analytical uses of race, class, and gender in the constructions of womanist theology gives indications of future directions.

Womanist theology and ethics explore the uniquely situated religious thought of black women. The studies began in the 1980s, initially based in a United States’ context and inspired by a definition from activist and writer Alice Walker. Womanist religious thought, to some degree, developed from the shortcomings of white American feminism, black feminism, and black male theology. Being aware of this disjuncture between black feminism and black communities is of special note to those of us who work in fields of religion for we bridge into a pastoral world, often remaining grounded in religious communities. The challenge for black women religious scholars is to speak to and with black women in the pews or on the prayer mats. The word womanist bridges far more intellectual and social

Dr. Stephanie Y. Mitchem, associate professor at University of South Carolina, has a joint appointment in Religious Studies and Women’s Studies. Her publications include: African American Folk Healing (New York University Press, 2007); Name It and Claim It: Prosperity Preaching and the Black Church (Pilgrim Press, 2007); African American Women Tapping Power (Pilgrim Press, 2004); Introducing Womanist Theology (Orbis Books, 2002).
barriers for African American women religion scholars who remain connected to black communities.

Womanist theology draws the real life experiences of African American women to the center of theological processes, including the methodologies that are used. As a result, womanist theologians and ethicists have been committed to the analysis of gender, race, and class, at the bare minimum, in order to deconstruct oppressions, sometimes recover lost meanings, and construct re-envisioned possibilities of being fully human.

**Gender**

Many younger women today have no personal memory of a world that had not been influenced by feminist movements. The ongoing public relations effort by some media analysts to diminish the perception of gender bias affects all women. Don’t all women want to be soccer moms living in suburban America? Women in high leadership positions are no longer surprising. And because there are a few black American women in leadership positions, some believe that all black women have had the same opportunities as many white women. But this is not true. Most black American women carry the burdens of family care, often unwed and alone. This situation is not the result of a conspiracy on the part of black women to reject marriage and family. It is rather the constant situation of, first, living under the aegis of stereotypes (including mammy, sapphire, and jezebel). Rising above such stereotypes to change living situations is further complicated because black women’s labor has been so normalized that social assistance programs are viewed as evidence of some lazy resistance to honest work.

One unhealthy answer to black American women’s social situations has been a slew of programs offered by some evangelical churches, such as Virtuous Woman or Woman of Virtue. The idea behind these programs is simple: black women need to become “real” women by being married and doing what the Bible supposedly says—be subservient to their husbands. The influence of such programs is not limited to select churches: speakers and preachers, such as T. D. Jakes, are published and televised and the ideas constructing black women into narrow frames are promoted throughout black communities. Similarly, such black American popular religion is promoted through contemporary gospel music, often played on top forty stations across black communities. Some of the popular gospel stars give testimony about their own experience of learning “correct” gender behavior through Jesus, “saved” from watching pornography or being homosexual. Their messages further constrict black women’s gendered identities. Sexism in black communities has been strengthened by popular religion.

Yet, the African American women with whom I speak outside the academic world generally have no interest in black feminism. It is not that they have no interest in justice. These women often hold highly sophisticated analyses of injustice at the grassroots level. Between black women’s stereotyped realities and
contemporary church-blessed sexism, the need for gender analysis has shifted, no longer exactly what it was when womanist religious scholars began their analyses in the 1980s. Political pressure that blames poor black women for being poor or church-based pressure that they fit limited gender constructions are contemporary forms of black American women’s gender trouble. Womanist theological analysis continues to ethically analyze black women’s gendered identities and the impact on their religious lives.

**Social Class**

Social class is complex, made up of access to money, social connections, knowledge, and experience. Many of these aspects are hidden because the United States is a country that pretends to be classless: anyone who works hard can have all of these things. But, as we face the realities of select and gated communities, that hard-working-success myth is simply not true. Black Americans continue to work hard, especially when we are poor, and we are most likely to benefit the least from our labors. So, although African American women are present in the so-called first world, we are often Othered in a process that Kristin Kopituch refers to as “third-worlding at home.” “Forms of power/knowledge generally associated with the colonial and postcolonial exploitation of a distant third world are also becoming increasingly apparent in the treatment of U.S. minorities” (Kopituch, 237). An example of being third world-ed became clear when the waters from Hurricane Katrina receded: many of those left behind were poor and black, women and children.

These processes create a social class dilemma for all black Americans: poor black people are accused of being lazy and not taking advantage of all the benefits of a rich economy. After all, the charge continues, this is the land of equal opportunity. Another concept also used against black Americans is that of the so-called permanent underclass: people who are many-generations poor will not be able to ever move out of their low social class because some genetic mutation has occurred, becoming the idea that “blood tells.”

But the realities of black American life are often invisible. For instance, in November 2006, the unemployment rate for white Americans was 3.9 percent and 8.6 for black Americans (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Fields that are expected to grow are health care, education, and professional and business services, all of which require access to higher education. Giving these numbers’ meaning in the daily life of many black people, Manning Marable stated: “The new racial domain is constructed as a deadly triangle (or perhaps an ‘unholy trinity’) of structural racism: mass unemployment, mass incarceration, and mass disenfranchise ment. . . . The cycle of destruction starts with chronic, mass unemployment and poverty” (Marable, 215).

Many white Americans prefer to take no responsibility for this situation. After all, a young white and very Catholic student in one of my classes stated angrily, “Why should we give them something they haven’t worked for?” Because most African Americans continue to be “third-world-ed,” womanist theologians must
continue to ethically analyze, to seek justice, and to reach for theological statements with integrity.

**Race**

Gender and class are not as contentious as the category of race. Part of the “third-worlding” of African Americans has been enforced by deliberately muddling the category of race. Some politicians support the idea that African American identity is considered to have lived past its prime. After all, it is argued that slavery is over, civil rights have been assured, and black Americans are full citizens. Social mores are used to control discussions of race. One is deemed gauche if one plays the race card; yet the cards are not of black Americans’ devise. Further, the situation of black Americans is sometimes thrown into a global light that falsely sets up comparative oppressions: black Americans do not know “real” suffering, not like those poor people in other countries. In very few cases, white people do not walk up to black people and insult, lynch, or rape them. However, playing the antirace card is an effective social control of black Americans.

These contemporary ways of denying race and, consequently, the structures of racism ignore historical realities that impinge on the present. We must face facts: black U. S. identity was not crafted on a census sheet but in the forges of enslavement. People from multiple African ethnicities often had to forego those other identities as a matter of survival. This was a pattern of colonizing black bodies that did not end with the emancipation proclamation in 1863. Considering black Americans as colonized subjects moves away from victimization and vindication as approaches to racial dialogue and theological analysis. Recognition and use of the colonized subject argument moves toward a stronger critical analysis of being black in America, resulting in stronger theological constructions. The failed period of reconstruction was turned into Jim Crow, another intense period of colonization, made even more intense as black Americans throughout the country were repeatedly deemed less than human by the deformed identity constructions of minstrelsy, religion, law, and the science of the times.

Certainly, as blackness was constructed, social theorist Michelle Wright points out, the black female Other was constructed in opposition to the black male. Blackness can be considered a “unity of diversity.” “[T]he category of race can never be fully divorced from the related categories of gender and sexuality” as the American social structure insists that male and female conform to idealized constructions (Wright, 5–6).

At the same time, whiteness was also being constructed as Jews and Irish people were moved to the white column. After the 1960s, white ethnicities became cool.
Today, these ethnic categories, like the unreal construction of the “Hispanic,” were ranged against the constructions of blackness. This was brought home to me when a white man asked: “So what are black people going to do now that you are no longer the largest minority and Hispanics are?” Simplistic understandings of race abound, and interracial conversations are stymied as was depicted in the movie Crash.

Womanist theologians continue to use race as a category, taking into account the changes of the times. The changes of the times demand new tools of scholarship. One route by which new tools have been developing happens as womanist theologians enter dialogues across the African Diaspora. These dialogical processes create new strands of discourse in the broader contexts of globalization, and as a result, gender, class, and race take on new meanings.

The uses of gender, race, and social class as tools of oppression were not imaginary inventions of women and people of color. The constructions of black American women’s identities began centuries ago and are continued in sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant, ways today. Many people are complicit in the construction of African American women’s identities. Many people benefit (and richly) from normalizing black women’s labors; unfortunately the beneficiaries are not often the black women themselves. Continued injustices against American black women demand more, not less, analysis. Greater scholarly rigor is needed as situations of injustice are complicated by new realities. Present and future womanist theological work involves further refinement, more intense conversation, and stepping more fully into global dialogue.

Womanist theology has begun tasks of analysis, deconstruction and reconstruction, tasks that would be impossible to complete in barely thirty years. Womanist theology is being refined and becoming more sophisticated as more and more conversation partners become involved. The future holds so much more promise.

References


