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The Future of Womanist Theology and Religious Thought

Womanist theology continues to be a burgeoning field on the theological landscape. M. Shawn Copeland has stated succinctly that the term *womanist* “signals a perspective or approach that places the differentiated (e.g., religious, personal, cultural, social, psychological, biological) experience of African American women at the hermeneutical center of theological inquiry and research, reflection and judgment” (Copeland, 203, 822). This definition of womanist theology encompasses the complexity and diversity of African American women’s experience, and reveals the multiplicity of dimensions that make up womanist religious thought. Nevertheless, many black women have resonated with this theology that prizes them and their lives in the black community. New offshoots in womanist theology and religious thought include engagements with secular humanism, Islam, African-derived religions, the African Diaspora, process theology, and postmodernism.

Origins of Womanist Theology

Captured by the literary gifts of Alice Walker and her resonating and transformative description of a womanist in her collection of essays titled *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, African American female seminary and doctoral students in the mid-1980s donned the mantle of *womanist* and began to refer to their theo-ethical work as such (Walker 1983, xi, xii), (Canon et al., 135). Through this declaration they found their own voice, and also differentiated their theological project from practitioners of black theology and white feminist theology.

Throughout Walker’s title essay in this collection, she led her readers on an exploration “in search of our mothers’ gardens.” In the midst of this exploration, she modeled practices of human excavation that womanist theologians continue to this day. Walker unearthed stories and practices of our mothers and foremothers. Her find was

monumental: splashes of color, beauty, and creativity—beyond all imagining, against all odds, and in the most unlikely places. Walker’s own mother’s garden, a prototype of the many beautiful gifts and works of art our foremothers bequeathed to us, remains a powerful and fruitful image and motivation for womanists. This legacy from our mothers and foremothers continues to shape and nurture the consciousness of womanist theologians, ethicists, biblical scholars, and scholars of religion as they construct God talk that is salvific for black women and their communities (Walker 1983, 238–43).

Christian Womanism

Christian womanist theologians have written about virtually all of the major tenets of the faith: the Trinity, Jesus Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit, theological anthropology, and ethics. Womanists have linked the crucified Jesus to the strange fruit hanging from the lynching tree, have questioned the role of the cross in understandings of Christian salvation, and have accentuated the salvific power of right relationships in the spirit of the reign of God (Williams 1993, 167). Biblical scholars and theologians alike have found in the biblical Hagar a sister in the wilderness whose spirit of survival and relationship with God are instructive for black women, especially single mothers (Weems 1988, 1–21 [Williams 1993, 167]). As womanists have come to voice, they have devoted themselves to ameliorating the suffering that has characterized too many African American women’s lives. Womanist theologians have likewise pushed back against the stereotypes that the dominant culture has created in an attempt to restrict the identities of black women and demonize their very selves. No, black women are not mammisses, Jezebels, and welfare queens. Rather, they are mothers, sisters, daughters, lovers, wives, lawyers, teachers, artists, and first ladies.

As womanist theologians have affirmed their right to name themselves and to counter deceitful stereotypes about black women, they have turned to the black woman as biotext (Thomas 1999, 497). Like Walker’s remembrance of her mother’s gardens, womanists have likewise searched out and celebrated the lives and witness of countless unnamed black women whose very lives shouted survival. Womanist theologians have likewise discovered other black women who have made contributions to church, society, and black culture. These include Zora Neale Hurston, Anna Julia Cooper, Henriette Delille, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Harriet Jacobs, Mary Church Terrell, and Mahalia Jackson. Womanist theologians and religious scholars have called forth a compelling cast of characters from black women’s literary genius because of their insightful truth telling. Shug and Celie, Janie Crawford, and the women of Brewster Place all have revealed dimensions of black women’s lives. Walker’s devotion to Zora Neale Hurston’s legacy continues to be a fruitful point of reference for theologians and ethicists who continue to be enthralled by Hurston’s ability to navigate the treacherous terrain of the Harlem Renaissance as a black writer, folklorist, and anthropologist.

An Incarnational Approach

Womanist theologians and scholars of religion have embraced a much needed incarnational approach whereby they have attended to the highly contested bodies of black women. Some have accentuated the part of Walker’s description of a womanist that describes womanists as female-loving and/or male-loving women who prefer women’s culture (Walker 1983, xi). In an age when new cases of HIV/AIDS in the United States are increasingly coming from the African American female community, womanists have not been silent. Some have chided their colleagues and the black church
for not engaging the diversity of sexual preference and the dire need for an ethic of black self-love. Others have taken up issues of embodiment and sexuality in an effort to promote right relationships, not only between black women, their brothers, sisters, and the entire community, but also within black women (and men), so that they can in fact love themselves, body and soul, regardless.

A 2004 collection of essays, *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, is an interrogation and celebration of black bodies and spirits by black religious scholars who are proponents of womanist theology, black theology, and humanist religious thought (Pinn and Hopkins 2004). The essays by all of the authors are provocative and edgy, as they call forth honest and sustained attention to the gift of sexuality and how it can be honored in a cultural milieu that despises or is suspicious of black bodies. Future womanist responses to issues of the erotic promise to be similarly creative and evocative.

Another collection of essays is noteworthy. *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* includes contributions from womanist theologians from the first, second, and third waves along with commentaries from some treasured conversation partners (Floyd-Thomas 2006, 1–2). In her introductory essay, editor Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas writes about revolutionary womanist theologians and scholars of religion who are not just dismantling the master’s house but building a new edifice constructed with black women’s ways of knowing. This transformational epistemology involves calling black women to voice to speak for themselves. Womanists are turning to our black sisters, living and deceased, and to themselves to build this new edifice for liberating God talk and talk about God. The intellectual praxis that womanists engage in is indeed revolutionary and life-changing.

**Third-Wave Womanism and Beyond**

Third-wave womanist Monica Coleman ponders Sojourner Truth’s query, “Ain’t I a woman?” and restated as “Ain’t I a Womanist Too?” Coleman hosted a conference on third wave womanist religious thought titled “Ain’t I a Womanist Too?” at Claremont School of Theology in February of 2010. She elaborates further on the conference title and says:

Just as Sojourner Truth’s question expanded notions of black womanhood in the nineteenth century, today’s third wave of womanist religious thought, while grounded in black women’s religiosity, explodes traditional notions of theology and religion. This third wave celebrates complexity; it is Christian and non-Christian, straight and queer, historical and postmodern, political and cultural, and lastly, committed to an open-ended vision of possibility. (Coleman, www.thirdwavewomanism.com)

Another third wave womanist religious scholar, Darnise Martin, has researched African Americans in a New Thought or Religious Science Church. Principles of this movement include a deep respect and inclusion of multiple paths to God. Religious Science is built upon the understanding that proper consciousness-raising enables ideas to become reality. What began as a primarily white movement in 1927 is now speaking to an African American community in California’s Bay Area and in other parts of the United States. While this particular church has noticeable ties with Christianity, Religious Science incorporates dimensions of various religions and spiritual paths that cohere with its principles (Martin 2005).

The future of womanist theology and religious thought is broad and encompassing.
of a host of perspectives. As Coleman mentioned above, womanist religious thought is breaking open long held understandings of theology and religion. Once a basically Christian project, womanist theology and religious thought is breaking boundaries and bearing fruit in new terrains. It is a movement that is clearly and forcefully displacing multiple dimensions of normativity (religion, race, gender, sexual preference) while preserving, saving, and honoring the lives of women of African ancestry and their communities. The future of womanist theology and religious thought will be international, intergenerational, cross-cultural, and global as it encompasses black women of Africa and the Diaspora.

Whatever the ebb and flow of womanism’s future development at the hands of theologians and religious scholars, these black women would do well to remember Alice Walker’s breadth, height, and depth that some twenty-seven years ago carved out space for black women of all hues, stripes, and sexualities. Walker’s womanists dreamt liberating dreams and honored and loved themselves, regardless. Periodically they were separatists for purposes of health and healing. The emergence of womanist theology back in the mid-1980s was quite explosive and revolutionary at the time and even now, and we can expect no less dramatic effect for womanist religious thought of the future.

References


