ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective

One of the most exciting developments in the theological scholarship of the 1980s has been the emergence of womanist ethics and theology. *Womanist* refers to a particular dimension of the culture of black women that is being brought to bear upon theological, ethical, biblical and other religious studies. These new interpretations of black women's religious experience and ideas have been sparked by the creative genius of Alice Walker. She defines the term womanist in her 1983 collection of prose writings *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.[1] In essence, womanist means black feminist.

As early as 1985, black women scholars in religion began publishing works that used the womanist perspective as a point of reference. The major sources for this work are the narratives, novels, prayers and other materials that convey black women's traditions, values and struggles, especially during the slavery period. Methodologically, womanist scholars tend to process and interpret these sources in three ways: (1) the celebration of black women's historical struggles and strengths; (2) the critique of various manifestations of black women's oppression; and (3) the construction of black women's theological and ethical claims. The content of womanist ethics and theology bears the distinctive mark of black women's assertiveness and resourcefulness in the face of oppression. The womanist ideal impels the scholars who embrace it to be outrageous, audacious and courageous enough to move beyond celebration and critique to undertake the difficult task of practical constructive work, toward the end of black women's liberation and wholeness.

Does the term *womanist* provide an appropriate frame of reference for the ethical and theological statements now being generated by black women? To answer this question, it is necessary first to examine critically Walker's own understanding and use of the term, and then to construct some basis for assessing its adequacy as a rubric for Christian ethical and theological discourse.

In 1981 Alice Walker wrote a review of *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson* for *The Black Scholar*.[2] The review lifts up the spiritual

[1] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

[2] Jean McMahon, ed., *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson (1795–1871), Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1981); Alice Walker, review of *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson (1795–1871), Black*

legacy of the nineteenth-century black Shaker, Rebecca Jackson, who had an unusual conversion experience, left her husband for a life of celibacy, and lived thereafter in close relationship with a Shaker sister, Rebecca Perot. Walker gives high praise to editor Jean McMahon Humez, but takes exception to Humez's suggestion that Jackson was a lesbian. Walker identifies at least three errors in judgment by Humez with respect to Jackson's sexual orientation: (1) her disregard of Jackson's avowed celibacy; (2) her questionable interpretation of Jackson's dreams about Perot as erotic; and (3) her attempt to "label something lesbian that the black woman in question has not." Walker's own position regarding Jackson's sexual orientation is that it would be "wonderful" either way. Having thus disclaimed the moral significance of Jackson's alleged lesbianism, she then goes on to suggest that lesbian would be an inappropriate word in any case, not only for Jackson, but for all black women who choose to love other women sexually. Walker offers her own word *womanist* as a preferred alternative to *lesbian* in the context of black culture. Her concern is to find a word that affirms connectedness rather than separation, in view of the fact that Lesbos was an island whose symbolism for blacks "is far from positive." Furthermore, Walker concludes that "the least we can do," and what may well be for black women in this society our only tangible sign of personal freedom, is to name our own experience after our own fashion, selecting our own words and rejecting those words that do not seem to suit.

Walker gives a more complete definition of womanist as a preface to *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, her 1983 collection of womanist prose that includes the *Gifts of Power* review. This definition has four parts, the first showing the word's derivation from *womanish* (opposite of *girlish*) and its primary meaning "black feminist" or "feminist of color." The second part conveys the sense of the word as explained in the book review; as a woman who loves other women but is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people; who is not separatist, but is "traditionally" universalist and capable (these traits being illustrated with excerpts of dialogue between mother and daughter). The third part celebrates what the womanist loves—music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, love, food, roundness, struggle, the Folk, herself—ending with the word "regardless," presumably an allusion to Walker's earlier call in the review for a word that affirms connectedness to the community and the world "*regardless* of who worked and slept with whom." The fourth and final part of the definition compares womanist to feminist as purple to lavender, expressing in vivid terms the conclusion that womanist has a deeper and fuller meaning than feminist.

Walker's definition of womanist represents a shift in emphasis from her earlier discussion of womanist in the book review. In the first instance

Visionary, Shaker Eldress, edited with an introduction by Jean McMahon Humez, in *Black Scholar* (November–December 1981): 64–67. Reprinted in Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 71–82.

womanist carries the connotation of black *lesbian*, and in the second it denotes black *feminist*, a designation that includes women who love women and those who love men. In both cases, however, her point is to name the experience of audacious black women with a word that acknowledges their sensibilities and traditions in ways that the words *lesbian* and *feminist* do not. Walker's womanist definition and writings send a clear and consistent signal to celebrate the black woman's freedom to choose her own labels and lovers.

It is apparent that a few black women have responded to this call for celebration by writing womanist theology and womanist ethics and by calling themselves womanist scholars.[3] Those who have made use of the term womanist in their writing have cited the definition that Walker gives in her preface to *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* generally without giving attention to Walker's explanation of womanist in her review of *Gifts of Power*. Walker's definition has been subjected each time to the writer's own editing and interpretation, partly because each writer seems compelled to construe its meaning in light of her own thought. This process of appropriation and adaptation merits close scrutiny. In our efforts to tailor Walker's definition to suit our own purposes, have we misconstrued the womanist concept and its meaning? Is the word womanist being co-opted because of its popular appeal and used as a mere title or postscript for whatever black women scholars want to celebrate, criticize or construct? Are we committing a gross conceptual error when we use Walker's descriptive cultural nomenclature as a foundation for the normative discourse of theology and ethics? On what grounds, if any, can womanist authority and authenticity be established in our work? In other words, what is the necessary and sufficient condition for doing womanist scholarship? To be a black woman? A black feminist? A black lesbian?

One approach to resolving these concerns would be to devise some reasonable categories for evaluating the extent to which womanist theological and ethical thought conforms to (or deviates from) Walker's basic concern for black women's freedom to name their own experience and to exercise prerogatives of sexual preference. If we assume, rather boldly, that Walker never intended to reserve exclusive authority to use the word as her own private vehicle of expression, it can be argued that the authority to label one's work as a womanist derives directly from one's ability to set forth an authentic representation of Walker's concept in that work. Three categories are sug-

[3] See, for example, Katie Geneva Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Toinette M. Eugene, "Moral Values and Black Womanists," *Journal of Religious Thought* 44 (Winter-Spring 1988): 23–34; Jacquelyn Grant, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 13 (Spring 1986): 195–212; Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988); and Delores S. Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," *Christianity and Crisis* (July 14, 1986): 230–232.

gested here as grounds for comparison and evaluation: context, criteria, and claims.

The context of the womanist perspective is set forth quite clearly in Walker's long definition of the word. While its general context is the folk culture of black women, its specific context is the intergenerational dialogue between black mothers and their daughters in an oppressive society. The origin of the word *womanist* is a traditional warning given by black mothers to their daughters, "You acting womanish," in response to their precocious behavior (i.e., "You trying to be grown"). The behavior in question is further described as outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful, words suggesting rebellion against the mother's authority, as well as resistance to oppressive structures that would limit knowledge and self-realization. However, it is evident that Walker's concern is to include the mother in the womanist context by ascribing to her the role of teacher and interpreter, and by portraying her as resigned to the daughter's assertion of her womanhood. This can be seen in the mother-daughter dialogues cited to illustrate the meaning of "traditionally universalist," with reference to the diversity of skin tones among blacks, and "traditionally capable," i.e., the determination of slaves to persist in their pursuit of freedom.

The criteria of the womanist perspective are very clearly spelled out in Walker's definition. To summarize, the womanist is a black feminist who is audacious, willful and serious; loves and prefers women, but also may love men; is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, and is universalist, capable, all loving, and deep. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect complete compliance with all of these criteria as a prerequisite for employing womanist nomenclature. But it is intellectually dishonest to label a person, movement or idea as womanist on the basis of only one or two of these criteria to the exclusion of all the others. Two of these criteria tend to have the broadest appeal in theological-ethical statements: commitment to the survival and wholeness of entire people and love of the Spirit. The reason for this should be obvious; these two criteria point directly to the self-understanding of the black church. However, they would seem not to merit the prominence theologians and ethicists ascribe to them, especially in view of the fact that they are not given any particular priority within the definition itself. In other words, it may be a distortion of Walker's concept to lift up these two criteria because they resonate with black church norms, while quietly dismissing others that do not. The fact is that womanist is essentially a secular cultural category whose theological and ecclesial significations are rather tenuous. Theological content too easily gets "read into" the womanist concept, whose central emphasis remains the self-assertion and struggle of black women for freedom, with or without the aid of God or Jesus or anybody else. The womanist concept does lend itself more readily to ethical reflection, given that ethics is often done independently of theology, as philosophi-

cal discourse with greater appeal to reason than to religious dogma. Walker's definition comprises an implicit ethics of moral autonomy, liberation, sexuality and love that is not contingent upon the idea of God or revelation. In any case, to be authentically "womanist," a theological or ethical statement should embrace the full complement of womanist criteria without omissions or additions intended to sanctify, de-feminize or otherwise alter the perspective Walker intended the word *womanist* to convey.

Despite the proliferation of theological claims that have been issued under the authority of the womanist rubric, Walker's womanist nomenclature makes only one claim—that black women have the right to name their own experience. This claim is inclusive of the prerogative of sexual preference; to choose one's own labels and lovers is a sign of having fully come into one's own. It may be understood theologically as the right to name one's own deity and sources of revelation, but to do so is to move beyond interpretation to the more dubious task of interpolation. Moreover, neither Walker's definition nor her discussion of womanist addresses the nature and purpose of God in relation to the plight of the oppressed, as blacks and/or as women. So it appears that womanist theology, with its liberatory theological claims, has been built upon a cultural foundation that not only was not intended to sustain theological arguments, but actually was fashioned to supplant ideas and images, theological or otherwise, that might challenge the supremacy of self-definition. This is not to deny the possibility of a genuine congruence between womanist theological-ethical discourse and the claim of personal and collective self-definition. The real problem here is the appropriation of the womanist concept as the prime ground and source for theological claims that have been extracted from the testimony of black women whose theology and ethics rested upon other foundations, and who, given the opportunity to choose labels, might have rejected womanist even as a name for their own experience.

It would seem that to do ethics in womanist perspective presents less of a problem, insofar as the construction of ethical claims can be pursued independently of theological considerations. Even so, one must take care not to force the ethical statements of one era into the ethical categories of another, nor to ascribe to our black foremothers womanist sensibilities shaped by a modernist impulse that they might not have endorsed or understood.

The necessary and sufficient condition for doing womanist scholarship has to be adherence to the context, criteria, and claims inherent in Walker's definition; it would be a mistake to recognize anything that any black woman writes with a womanist title or reference as womanist discourse simply because the author is black and female. Ultimately, the authority to determine what qualifies as womanist discourse rests with Alice Walker, who has defined and demonstrated the meaning of the word in her writing with great skill and consistency. However, given the fact that so many black female

scholars have already taken the liberty of using her word in our work, we need to come to terms with the responsible exercise of the authority we have claimed.

I am fully convinced of the wisdom of Walker's advice to black women to name our own experience after our own fashion and to reject whatever does not suit. It is upon the authority of this advice that I want to explore further the suitability of the term womanist for theological-ethical discourse. The context, criteria, and claims of the womanist perspective provide an appropriate basis for raising critical questions concerning the suitability of this label for the work black women scholars are currently doing in theology and ethics.

First, there are contextual problems, beginning with tensions inherent in the dialogues presented in Walker's definition. There is an intergenerational exchange where the traditional piety of the acquiescent mother is in conflict with the brash precociousness of the womanish daughter. The definition conveys a spirit of celebration, evoking approval of the daughter's rebellion and the mother's resignation to it. This push to be "womanish" or "grown" also bears a hint of self-assertion in a sexual sense, where sexual freedom is a sign of moral autonomy. Thus, the context of womanist self-assertion includes two apparently inseparable dimensions: the personal struggle for sexual freedom and the collective struggle for freedom in the political-social sense. Yet, in the theological-ethical statements womanist is used to affirm the faith of our mothers principally in the collective sense of struggle, that is, for freedom from racist and sexist oppression. Further, it should be noted that although the question of Rebecca Jackson's sexual orientation is Walker's point of departure for discussing the meaning of womanist, she refrains from applying the term to Jackson. Walker chides Humez for not taking seriously Jackson's description of herself as celibate, but Jackson's choice of celibacy (i.e., not to love either women or men sexually, not even her own husband) as an act of submission to a spiritual commitment to follow Jesus Christ evidently is not regarded by Walker as a womanist assertion of sexual freedom. Thus it would seem inappropriate to label as womanist those saintly rebels (e.g., Sojourner Truth) whose aim was not to assert their sexual freedom but rather to work sacrificially toward the liberation of their people as followers of Jesus Christ. To designate a historic figure as womanist solely on the basis of political-social engagement without addressing the personal-sexual dimension is a contextual error typical of womanist theological-ethical discourse. To be authentically grounded in the womanist context, these statements cannot be simply celebrations of black women's assertiveness, but must also give attention to the inherent dialogical and intergenerational tensions within the black woman's struggle for freedom, and to both dimensions of that struggle, the personal-sexual and the political-social.

A further contextual problem stems from the fact that Walker's definition

gives scant attention to the sacred. Womanist is defined in secular terms, centered on a worldly premise of self-assertion and self-sufficiency. The womanist's concern for the sacred is demonstrated in the definition by italicizing the verb in the statement that she "*loves* the Spirit," but otherwise finds no distinctiveness among her loves for other aspects of nature and culture (she also "*loves* the folk"). The term *womanist theology* is in my view a forced hybridization of two disparate concepts and may come to resemble another familiar hybrid, the mule, in being incapable of producing offspring. Novelist Zora Neale Hurston once declared in the voice of one of her characters that the black woman is "the mule of the world," but unlike the mule the black woman has often sought to cast upon the Lord those burdens too hard for her to bear, and has reproduced herself, body and spirit, through many generations. Not only does this scant attention to the sacred render the womanist perspective of dubious value as a context for theological discourse, but it ultimately subverts any effort to mine the spiritual traditions and resources of black women. The use of black women's experience as a basis for theology is futile if that experience is interpreted apart from a fully theistic context. One might argue here that it is inappropriate to make such an issue of the distinctiveness of the sacred in black theological discourse in view of our African heritage that allegedly draws no such distinctions, at least not the way they are drawn in the West. In the African tradition, however, the basis for denial of the distinction between sacred and secular is the notion that the sacred pervades everything. By contrast, Western modernity exalts the secular to the point of disregarding or circumscribing the sacred in unhealthy ways. African American Christians, poised historically in a peculiar position between two incompatible world views, have tended to resolve this dilemma by fashioning for ourselves a world view that derives its power, character, and spirit from the sacred realm, from which we have drawn wisdom and hope to survive within the profane world of those who have oppressed us in the name of God and mammon. Thus it would appear incongruous to try to do black women's theology, or even just to articulate it in words, within a context that marginalizes the sacred within black women's existence. The search for our mothers' gardens, and our own, seems pointless if we remain oblivious to our mothers' gods.

The womanist concept sets forth a variety of criteria that convey specific moral values, character traits and behavior, especially with regard to sexuality. One important question to raise is whether or not the sexual ethics implied by the womanist concept can serve the best interests of the black family, church, and community. Part of Walker's original intent was to devise a spiritual, concrete, organic, characteristic word, consistent with black cultural values, that would describe black women who prefer women sexually, but are connected to the entire community. *Womanist* is a preferred alternative to *lesbian* because it connotes connectedness and not isolation, and a womanist is one who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually,

and who appreciates and prefers women's culture. Clearly, in Walker's view, sexual preference is not a morally or ethically significant factor in determining whether or not one is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female." But the affirmation of the connectedness of all persons within the black community regardless of sexual preference is not the only issue at stake with respect to the well-being of black people. In my view there is a fundamental discrepancy between the womanist criteria that would affirm and/or advocate homosexual practice, and the ethical norms the black church might employ to promote the survival and wholeness of black families. It is problematic for those of us who claim connectedness to and concern for the black family and church to engage these criteria authoritatively and/or uncritically in the formulation of theological-ethical discourse for those two institutions. If black women's ethics is to be pertinent to the needs of our community, then at least some of us must be in a position to offer intellectual guidance to the church as the principal (and perhaps only remaining) advocate for marriage and family in the black community. There is a great need for the black churches to promote a positive sexual ethics within the black community as one means of responding to the growing normalization of the single-parent family, and the attendant increases in poverty, welfare dependency, and a host of other problems. Moreover, it is indisputably in the best interest of black children for the church not only to strengthen and support existing families, but also to educate them ethically for marriage and parenthood. The womanist nomenclature, however, conveys a sexual ethics that is ambivalent at best with respect to the value of heterosexual monogamy within the black community.

Thirdly, it is problematic for black women who are doing womanist scholarship from the vantage point of Christian faith to weigh the claims of the womanist perspective over against the claims of Christianity. The womanist perspective ascribes ultimate importance to the right of black women to name our own experience; in the Christian perspective, Christ is the incarnation of claims God makes upon us as well as the claims we make upon God. While there may be no inherent disharmony between these two assertions, the fact remains that there are no references to God or Christ in the definition of womanist. For whatever reason, christology seems not to be directly relevant to the womanist concept. And if we insist upon incorporating within the womanist rubric the christological confessions of black women of faith, or discerning therein some hidden or implicit christology, then we risk entrapment in the dilemma of reconciling Christian virtues such as patience, humility and faith, with the willful, audacious abandon of the womanist. Walker only obscures the issue by making vague references to the spirit instead of naming Christian faith and practice. For example, she uses terms like *general power* and *inner spirit* to describe Rebecca Jackson's motive for leaving husband, home, family, friends and church to "live her own life." Yet it seems obvious that Jackson would name her own experience

simply as a call to follow Christ. I suspect that it is Christianity, and not womanism, that forms the primary ground of theological and ethical identity with our audacious, serious foremothers.

In conclusion, the womanist perspective has great power, potential and limitations; it may be useful as a window to the past, but a truly womanist tradition has yet to be fully created and understood. I have raised some questions concerning the suitability of womanist as a rubric for black women's ethics and theology, yet I have no better word to offer, nor do I feel especially compelled to come up with one. I am aware that many of my colleagues in theological scholarship are wholly committed to the womanist perspective, and my principal aim has been to prod us all further in the direction of critique and construction. If we are going to be serious about the constructive task, then we must be celebrative and critical at the same time, neither letting ourselves become so enraptured in celebrating our heroines and ideals that we sweep aside the critical questions, nor allowing the critical process to dampen our zeal for the content of our work. I have great faith that black female theologians and ethicists are on target to give significant direction to both church and society by further exposing the roots of oppression in all its forms and manifestations, and by discovering more keys to our personal and collective survival, regardless of which labels we embrace.

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