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WOMANIST THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

A Reader

Edited by
Katie Geneva Cannon,
Emilie M. Townes,
and Angela D. Sims

WJK WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

© 2011 Westminster John Knox Press

First edition
Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Book design by Sharon Adams
Cover design by Lisa Buckley
Cover art: © David Chmielewski & James Mclaughlin/Getty Images

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Womanist theological ethics : a reader / edited by Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims. — 1st ed.
p. cm. — (Library of theological ethics)
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 978-0-664-23537-6 (alk. paper)
1. Christian ethics. 2. Womanist theology. I. Cannon, Katie G. II. Townes, Emilie Maureen, 1955– III. Sims, Angela D.
BJ1278.F45W66 2011
241.082--dc23

2011023746

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For Angelin Jones Simmons and Sarbeth Jevona Fleming (kgc);
For Tricia L. Townes and Laurel C. Schneider (emt);
For Helene Nichele Sims and Charley Isabel Sims (ads)

virtue, far too many of us, according to John Raines, spend a vast amount of life's energy "looking up and blaming down."[26] In order to be effective justice-makers who transform praxis in the direction of nonalienating experiences, each person must apply a fundamental inquiry of class indicators to all areas of her/his biotext. This type of intentional contextualized socioreligious archaeology makes conscious and exposes to full light the specific, explicit social class in a milieu in which class is supposedly a nonfactor.

CONCLUSION

This essay acknowledges that along the class continuum of rich and poor, most people have not had a workable tool to assess our actual class status. Instead, we opt to live a parcel of lies, posing and passing as so-called members of the muddled-middle status quo or existing in a stasis that we-are-all-the-same-classlessness. In order to analyze the cultural disposition of class, we must wrestle with fundamental questions befitting this type of justice-making investigation: Who are the powerbrokers benefiting from the large segments of the population that repeatedly fail the litmus text of somebodiness? As ethicists, how do we weigh the social consequences when the vast majority of U.S. citizens imitate and emulate paradigmatic forms of class identities not our own? In this hothouse of elitism, it seems reasonable to investigate the relationship among compulsive, obsessive, addictive, controlling/punishing, violent behaviors and the propensity to numb our pain of estrangement, self-abnegation, and invisibility. Whose interests are served when women, men, and children who are denied basic human rights are conscienticized to fight against lucrative exploitation of class limits? These are not questions for death-dealing reactionaries who resent voices crying from the ground, or for those who provide glib answers to urgent inquiry. This presentation of the intrusive markers of social class is a soul-searching mandate for all who understand that what is revolutionary for some is suicide for others.

26. John Raines, "Class, Classroom, and Complicity: An Argument for Radical Teaching," unpublished essay, Temple University, 1998; Gloria Steinem, "Supremacy Crimes," *Ms.* (August-September 1999), 44–47; C. L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, eds., *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey, eds., *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Michelle M. Tokarczyk and Elizabeth H. Fay, eds., *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).

Chapter 15

Living as Religious Ethical Mediators

A Vocation for People of Faith in the Twenty-first Century

Marcia Riggs

Delivered initially as an April 2006 inaugural address at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, to celebrate my promotion and appointment as the J. Erskine Love Professor of Christian Ethics, this essay reflects my ongoing development of a mediating ethic, informed by ethical theory and practice, with very specific origins in my journey as a person of faith and my development as a constructive womanist ethicist. To examine the theoretical heart of my constructive ethical thinking, my confessional, professional, and intellectual autobiography serves as a point of departure to contextualize my current scholarship. The theoretical heart of my constructive ethical thinking informs a practice of (1) ethics as cross-cultural encounter, (2) religious ethical mediation, and (3) vocation for people of faith in the twenty-first century.

MY CONFESSIONAL, PROFESSIONAL, AND INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS POINT OF DEPARTURE

In 1999, about eight years after being at Columbia Seminary, I experienced a different kind of spiritual restlessness than I had ever felt before. This spiritual

restlessness led me to explore my faith in unfamiliar ways and with people who were either not African Methodist Episcopal Zion, my denominational church, or who did not belong to any institutional church and who described themselves as spiritual but not religious. A highlight of this exploration was participation in a retreat and workshop based in ritual theater titled "World Woman and the Temple of Many Cultures: Using Sacred Circle to Explore Our Diverse Identities." In that sacred circle, I experienced the movement between *chronos* and *kairos* time in such a way that I began to conceptualize my emergent metaphor of "living into tensions" for Christian ethics as mediating process and life in the church. Fundamental to how we live faithfully anew, "living into tensions" is also a central aspect of my scholarly projects.

I received professional mediation training at the Justice Center of Atlanta. I investigated how the theory and practice of mediation, as part of the alternative dispute-resolution movement, was like and unlike my initial thoughts about Christian ethics as mediating process. This training not only provided me with an introduction to professional mediation; it gave way, more importantly, to the development of the theory and practice of Religious Ethical Mediation (R.E.M.), a theory and practice that are informed by my theology and inform my pedagogy.

When I revised and published my dissertation in 1994, I wrote about a mediating ethic at the heart of an ethic of responsibility that emerged from ethical insights and social reform activities of the nineteenth-century black women's club movement. This mediating ethic interfaced with the synthesis proposed by H. Richard Niebuhr in his ethic of responsibility. Niebuhr's quest to construe an ethic of responsibility that was an "ethics of the fitting" rather than an ethics that was solely teleological (an ethics of the good) or deontological (an ethics of the right) marked a significant move in developing contextual ethics because his synthesis requires us to acknowledge a relationship between the social, the philosophical and theological, and the historical within ethical thought.

The mediating ethic that emerged from the socioreligious ethical tradition of the nineteenth-century black women's club movement gave voice to what I think is muted in Niebuhr's ethic of responsibility: the self as sociohistoric being. As proposed in Niebuhr's ethic, we could still understand ourselves to be autonomous, rational selves asking the question, "What is fitting?" However, the black club women remind us that we have to ask the ethical question "Who am I to be, and what am I required to do?" as sociohistoric selves.

To ask the ethical question as sociohistoric selves means that the moral anthropology is no longer one that holds rationality, our ability to reason, as the earmark of what makes us human and thus capable of discerning what the ethical requires us to be and do. The moral anthropology that asks the ethical question from the ground of sociohistoric selves holds that it is relationality, our need and our ability to relate to one another as embodied beings, that is the earmark of what makes us human and thus capable of discerning what the ethical requires us to be and do.

Sociohistoric selves are embodied beings who exist and act from their physical, psychological, mental, and spiritual particularities. As sociohistoric selves we each know that "I am because we are." The individual self is a complex self, ever evolving in relation to biology, family, communities, societies, histories, ecosystems—in a word, the cultures into which that self is born and participates continually both consciously and unconsciously or, in more ethical categories, both intentionally and complicitly. Thus, when I encounter you, I encounter that complex self, and vice versa. It is this experience of encounter that defines the ethical questions—Who am I to be? and What am I required to do?—that require discernment. Because it is an experience of cross-cultural encounter, we must also speak of ethics as cross-cultural encounter.

ETHICS AS CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

Ethics as cross-cultural encounter refers to that which (1) constitutes the basis of morality that we understand as the social enterprise that governs our common life and (2) is determinative of moral virtues, values, and norms. As the basis of morality, cross-cultural encounter means that we ask about rightness and wrongness, ideals and duties, that which is fitting and liberating, as we encounter others. This is the case because it is not until we have some particular others with whom to engage that we can most fully ask, Who am I to be? Who are we to be? What am I required to do? What are we required to do?

Ethics as cross-cultural encounter means that ethics is intrinsic to who we have been created to be—in relationship with others—and also emerges as we encounter others with whom we seek or find ourselves in relationship. Cross-cultural encounter is not simply a description of how we need to live out our lives in a postmodern, pluralist, multicultural world. A cross-cultural encounter is an earmark of how we have been created. We have been created by God in God's image. It is in our encounters with one another and desire to develop interpersonal relationships that the *imago Dei* begins to come into full focus. Because we name and know ourselves through socially constructed lenses, we frequently see one another out of focus. We attribute meaning that, in effect, often annihilates our embodied differences and leads us to label one another in ways that judge, dismiss, objectify, and silence. Contrary to the words of the song, we do not see one another *as an expression of divinity or the Christ in the other,* and we do harm. The harm we do is sometimes psychological/emotional; other times, physical; and frequently manipulative/coercive or exploitative. The harm we do, in any of these forms, is always violence.

Theological reflections have traditionally ascribed our inability to keep one another in focus, or to encounter one another as we seek relationship, to our fallenness. We speak of the need to transcend our embodied differences. Yet as sinners we often realize the best we can do is to ignore what we see, to ignore one another's embodied humanity, and to seek to love some essential humanness

that we all possess. However, from the theological position I espouse here, traditional theological reflection has led us astray into denial of the *imago Dei*, the image of God, in each of us and consequently into denial of that which makes us capable of being and acting morally. The *imago Dei* in each of us must not be relegated to something essentially human nor to a way of relating to one another that is contingent on our ability to transcend or ignore our embodied differences. We, in all of our embodied differences, incarnate the *imago Dei*.

A theological assertion of ethics as cross-cultural encounter posits that to see, to recognize, and to embrace our embodied differences is how we remember the rest of the traditional theological mantra: We are sinners *saved by grace*. For it is as sinners saved by grace that we are called, according to Second Corinthians, to the ministry of reconciliation. Sinners saved by grace are sociohistoric selves who see one another from a new angle of vision guided by God's spirit, for "the love of Christ urges us on." It is Christ's death and resurrection that establishes the rule of love as a radical reorientation on how we relate to others, how we encounter others, because in Christ we are a new creation. As God has created us, God also reconciles us—creation and reconciliation meet in Christ. We are sociohistoric selves who are *imago Dei*, who are *imago Christi*. Accordingly, recreated in the image of Christ, we have been given a ministry of reconciliation that requires of us a deep abiding response, a responsibility to be "ambassadors for Christ," to do the ministry of mediation in the world. When we accept this responsibility to do the ministry of mediation in the world, we make a commitment to embody practices that nurture the virtues, values, and norms of ethics as cross-cultural encounter. One practice, religious ethical mediation, and one normative virtue and value of this practice, empathy, illustrate ethics as cross-cultural encounter.

A PRACTICE OF ETHICS AS CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTER: RELIGIOUS ETHICAL MEDIATION

Practices indispensable to moral formation are actions and rites that center, sustain, and order ways of living morally. Religious ethical mediation (R.E.M.) is an indispensable practice to the moral formation of "ambassadors for Christ" called to embody a ministry of reconciliation. This ministry of reconciliation is a ministry of mediation for people of faith who understand that being created in the image of God, recreated in Christ, is to live as moral beings in relationship with others as an experience of cross-cultural encounter. Thus, cross-cultural encounter means living in relationship as differently embodied sociohistoric selves who must "live into the tensions" that relational differences entail.

R.E.M. as a practice of ethics as cross-cultural encounter is therefore a practice that forms people of faith to do the ministry of reconciliation as a ministry of mediation. This practice empowers people of faith to mediate tensions/conflicts with respect to that which is (1) religious—that which gives ultimate meaning to our lives and from which we derive our values—and (2) ethical—those values for living and visions for life that describe and prescribe us and our sense of selves as individuals, communities, institutions, and societies. R.E.M. as a practice seeks to form people of faith to have a relational worldview and a transformative orientation to conflict and to view conflicts not simply as problems to be solved but as opportunities for moral growth and transformation.

Empathy, signifying a character trait as well as a social good, is a normative virtue and value that R.E.M. seeks to nurture. To illustrate, I summarize a scene from the movie *The Associate*: Laurel Ayers, a black female executive, finds her white male counterpart, Frank, promoted over her. Ayers not only has seniority; she trained Frank. This denial of promotion leads Laurel to resign her position and found her own company. No longer employed by an established firm, Laurel is unable to get appointments with prospective clients, even when they find the prospectus that she sends to them interesting. She is repeatedly dismissed by being told that there are partners to be consulted before any decision on hiring her firm can be reached. When she finally does get a face-to-face with a potential client, a white male president of a company, he admits that he was expecting a man. Desperate not to lose this opportunity, Laurel decides to deceive this potential client by saying that she does have a male partner. From that moment forward, Laurel creates Robert S. Cutty, a virtual white male executive who is the mastermind behind the Ayers Firm. The rest of the movie reveals what it takes to maintain this deception and what occurs when Laurel decides finally to expose the deception.

The above synopsis reminds us that people of faith must nurture the virtue of empathy in order to minimize risks associated with deception. In addition, this example of empathy illustrates that both Laurel and the men lack, in the words of an intercultural communications theorist, the capacity for "imaginative intellectual and emotional participation in another's experience." That is, they lack the capacity to imagine the thoughts and feelings of another person from that person's perspective. Without the virtue of empathy, we will not only use deception to foster and/or maintain a relationship, we actually become deceitful persons. Laurel, caught in the dynamics of patriarchal, white, racist capitalism, acts in complicity with such, and by so doing she must not only *act* deceitfully; she must *be* deceitful, literally donning a mask. The white male executives, truly caught in the dynamics of patriarchal, white, racist capitalism, also act in complicity with such, and by so doing they prefer to do business with, and even honor, an elusive, for all intents and purposes absent, white male executive, for Cutty appears only once prior to the evening of disclosure. As stated in the example's overview, the white male executives *lie* to Laurel about their partners' unwillingness to hire her and then *they become their lie* and are held captive to their need to be only in relationship with someone like themselves. Thus, both Laurel and the male executives betray ethics as cross-cultural encounter. Neither is able to be a fully embodied sociohistoric self who desires to seek and to find relationship with the other. Without empathy as a character trait, people of

faith are unable to incarnate the image of God. We are unable to seek and find authentic relationship with others.

Set in small-town Mississippi, John Grisham's novel *A Time to Kill* demonstrates that empathy is not only a character trait; it is also a value—a social good. This understanding of empathy, described clearly in the closing arguments of the novel's movie adaptation, in which Carl Lee Haley, an African American man, is on trial for killing two young white men who raped his young daughter, challenges us to assess ways in which race, class, and gender in cross-cultural encounters are intricately connected to an understanding of the common good.

From the beginning of the trial, the impaneled jury is certain that they will find Carl Lee guilty. Yet after the defense attorney, Jake, makes his closing argument, Carl Lee is acquitted. What transpires prior to Jake's making that closing argument is a conversation between him and Carl Lee in which cross-cultural encounter finally happens. Jake comes to the jail cell to tell Carl Lee that he has no more points of law to argue and that Carl Lee should take a deal. Carl Lee tells Jake that he will not take a deal. Carl Lee will not abandon his family. Instead, he confronts Jake about his complicity with systemic racism, which prevents Jake from comprehending the magnitude of Carl Lee's situation. In fact, Carl Lee reminds Jake that they are not the same. Jake is like the members of the all-white jury; because of his cultural conditioning, Jake sees Carl Lee in the same way as the jurors perceive him. Consequently, Carl Lee poses a question and makes a final assertion to Jake: "If you were on that jury, what would it take to convince you to set me free? That's how you'll save us both."

When Jake stands before the jury after that conversation with Carl Lee, he acknowledges and owns his sociohistoric particularity. From this position of self-acceptance, he becomes empathetic in the sense described previously. He now participates emotionally and intellectually in the imprisoned black man's, Carl Lee's, experience. From this posture of empathy, Jake invites the all-white jury—not yet ready to be empathetic—to become sympathetic. That is, to imagine Carl Lee's position as if it were their own. Empathy is practiced by Jake as a virtue and becomes a social good as the law is transvalued from an arbiter of a single truth into a means for adjudicating competing truths. The nurture of empathy as a social good is critical for living authentically as people of faith in a multiconfessional, multireligious, multicultural world.

A VOCATION FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A presenting question is "Why R.E.M. in the twenty-first century?" Religious ethical mediation is an important practice in the twenty-first century because at this point in time the real culture wars are between (1) a culture of deception and (2) a culture of moral courage. The primary values of a culture of deception are repression and silence. When we participate intentionally or complicitly

in this culture, our morality is driven by these two complex, interrelated fears: (1) fear concerned with loss—loss of power, status, and/or privilege—and (2) fear concerned with devaluation—fear of being dismissed, objectified, and/or misperceived. The primary values of a culture of moral courage are empathy and nonviolence. When we participate intentionally in this culture, our being and doing find expression through responsive moral agency when our ethics as cross-cultural encounter engender to seek and to find relationships with others that support the surviving and thriving of all of creation.

R.E.M. is a means to address these culture wars in such a way that individuals and groups have to be engaged in processes of self-criticism and mutual criticism from the perspective of global moral flourishing. Individually and collectively we have to ask ourselves about how we live along the moral agency axis from complicity to accountability to responsibility. We all have to be engaged in intentional processes of *living into tensions* of ambiguity, complexity, perplexity, fear, and/or ignorance of the other—tensions of conflict—so that from those tensions opportunities for creative moral responses and agency emerge. In other words, we all must be engaged in practices that allow us to live creatively into the tensions between rejection and invitation, between exclusivity and inclusivity, if we are to participate in the expansion and transformation of moral community.

A second concern addresses the need for people of faith to speak of R.E.M. as a vocation. People of faith confess that some power or being oversees the universe, and we participate in some religion, belief system, and/or institution wherein we profess, through theological doctrines based in sacred texts, who that power or being is and how it is known to us. I use the term "people of faith" because I invite all of those who fit this description to consider that we have a calling, a vocation, in the twenty-first century. We are to remain committed to our particular confessions and professions without being absolutist about them. As people of faith encounter intrareligious pluralism and interreligious diversity, we must both listen to and learn from a plethora of voices if we are to survive.

It must be our calling as people of faith to break complicity in the violence of the culture of deception. It must be our calling to nurture a quest for cross-cultural encounter, a quest for interdependency, healing, and just peace. We must live as religious ethical mediators who expect the encounter with a multitude of voices to be an opportunity for a creative ethical response to emerge that will interpose and communicate among our differences. Now is the time for us to open our hearts. Now is the time for us to live as religious ethical mediators.