



The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race & Ethnicity
433 Mendenhall Laboratory
125 South Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210
www.kirwaninstitute.org

Review of Emilie M. Townes', Ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (New York: Orbis, 2005).

by Marguerite Spencer

"To be Black in White America is to suffer."

Jamie T. Phelps, O.P. (49)

In *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, the authors gathered here by Emilie M. Townes address the nature of evil and suffering from a womanist perspective, as they confront the troubling reality of the African-American community (1). Yet their ecumenical and interdisciplinary essays also embody a “crafty, calculated, joyful, and faith-filled” witness to an emerging hope in justice and equality that “can only be sustained by the Spirit (9).” Townes draws on Alice Walker to define a womanist as “a woman committed to an integrated analysis of race, gender, and class” in light of the gospel message of salvation and hope (1). Womanists anchor their thought in the African-American church and its people, yet they seek to debunk absolutes and universals, opening up all forms of theological discourse for reconsideration through the use of creative methodology (2, 9). They also extract a set of principles from black women's historical and cultural legacy from which to choose as their orientation to the world. While all black women are not womanists, the potential is embedded in their experiences (237). Although her organizing themes are quixotic, Townes collects womanist essays on a wide range of issues from the role of the church in suppressing African-American women, to social sin, to the theology of suffering, and the deliverance of discipleship. I attempt here to capture the essence of these descriptive and proscriptive reflections using my own organizing principles.

Women's Voices

Karen Baker-Fletcher discusses the impact and importance of voice in womanist experience. Examples of this are found throughout the collection. Claris J. Martin locates a discussion of theodicy in the spiritual autobiography of Maria Stewart. Katie Geneva Cannon elevates the African American folk sermons, prayers, and proverbs featured in the works of Zora Neale Hurston. To Cannon, Hurston represents the literary voice that incorporates the seminal experiences of evil, suffering, and God's goodness in black lives (227). The black church must listen, she insists, in order to end patriarchy and allow black women to emerge as moral agents (221).

Theodicy and Suffering

Cannon couches the problem of evil in the question, "Can God create a rock that God can't pick up?" The rock represents the transgressions that proceed directly from human sin – structures of domination and subordination that reinforce hierarchies based on race, sex, class, and sexual orientation (219). In "Confronting and Exorcising Evil through Song," Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan draws upon the texts and music of spirituals to fashion an Afrocentric, womanist concept of theodicy (151). Spirituals, she argues, "disclose the reality of and the fight against two evils that helped induce their birth: slavery and racism (150)." They document the reality of the oppressed and the oppressor and the use of power by *the white man*. Kirk-Duggan notes that slaves mixed symbolism, mysticism, humor, and irony to orate and interpret their exploited beings. Yet survival and hope permeate the spirituals, and are passed along through a narrative that was embraced during the civil rights movement (155-56). She argues that "[s]pirituals are ritual components of a collective exorcism where slaves [and civil rights activists] fight evil with the power constructs of freedom and justice through song (159)." Spirituals are committed to a theodicy in which a liberating *omni*-God and human beings freely participate together in a society that moves to end racism and sexism (165).

For the authors, the problem of evil involves black suffering, which Martin describes as having three essential characteristics. First, blacks experience a "double portion" of suffering, racism and classism, which is mal-distributed or concentrated among them when compared to whites. Second, this suffering is "enormous", impacting life expectancy and self-realization. Finally, black suffering is "non-catastrophic" – rather than striking quickly, it is ongoing and trans-generational (22).

In her essay, "The 'Loves' and 'Troubles' of African-American Women's Bodies," Cheryl Townsend Gilkes unpacks the racial oppression and cultural humiliation that African-American women and men suffer when beauty norms undercut their self-esteem and capacity to love (232). Black women are pained simply by being embodied, coping with others' responses to their hair, skin, and size. Gilkes notes, however, that the African American community contributes to women's pain, categorizing them at young ages as "pretty" or "ugly" and blaming them as the source of its problems (240). To address this form of suffering, Gilkes draws an Alice Walker, who taps into the heroic legacies of women like Harriet Tubman and Mary Church Terrell, the latter of which embraced the full range of women's colors and sizes. Walker emphasizes self-love, exalting "food and full-featured roundness" (239).

Institutional Racism and Social Sin

Frances E. Wood explores the notion that evil is inherent in every institution by examining the black church. In her essay, "The Role of the Church in the Oppression of African-American Women", Wood writes, "[t]he yoke of silencing, degrading, ignoring or dismissing women weighs down the Black Christian community in a conspiracy against its own total liberation (39)." Wood argues that the black church contributes to social evil by failing to discuss gender justice, denying women their full humanity, and perpetuating patterns of discrimination (41). Christianity "elevates" black women to the status of martyrs for the cause, which ensures that they do not view themselves as entitled to nurturance or deserving of pleasure and joy in this life (3). She calls for an end to the worship of maleness and the development of an ethic of mutuality (45).

The social nature of sin occupies Delores S. Williams in her essay, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin." In the spirituals and slave autobiographies she finds both sin as immoral conduct and the far more serious collective social evil, in which one dominant group exerts its power in a way that brutalizes another with less power -- a transgression "worthy of consignment to hell (138)." Williams draws on James Cone, who describes sin for whites as defining their existence in terms of whiteness, and for blacks as a desire to be white. (139). Black women describe sin as being unworthy because of the elevation of white womanhood, the devaluation of black women's humanity, and the defilement of black women's bodies (143). In both instances sin is social -- it is society who defines, devalues, and defiles (145). Williams reminds the reader, however, that this notion of social sin extends to the African-American community as well (146).

Jamie T. Phelps, O.P. describes how the social sins of racism and sexism continue to "checkmate" the Spirit, in her essay "Confronting the Evil of Social Sin and Socially Sinful Structures." Phelps argues that "those who participate in the construction and perpetuation of socially sinful institutions, which mediate existential suffering and death, are participating in...social sin (49)." Worldwide patterns of dehumanization and marginalization are incompatible with the Christian belief of equality, Christ's redemptive act, and the universal mission of the church (49). Phelps shows that the Roman Catholic Church within the United States participated in these sinful structures by endorsing slavery. The development of Catholic social teachings, she argues, places the Church under its own mandate to struggle against racism and sexism through a radical transformation in "the structures of society" as well as hearts and minds (54).

Consciousness

M. Shawn Copeland argues that religious consciousness is the crucial mediator in the personal and communal, spiritual and political transformation of African-American experiences. This consciousness empowers, heals, and informs women and their political practice (4-5). In her essay, "Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective," Copeland acknowledges that suffering is universal and has no ranking, but particularizes the suffering of women to

illustrate the ongoing Christian theological effort to respond to it in graced ways (110). She allows the voices of enslaved or fugitive black women to speak of their suffering – which grounds a theology of suffering characterized by remembering, retelling, resisting, and redeeming. Black women's cognitive practice of critical self-consciousness emphasizes the dialectic between oppression, reflection on this oppression and activism to resist and change it (123).

While Kirk-Duggan defines the Afrocentric experience as a DuBoisian “veil” or double consciousness, Jacquelyn Grant speaks of the triple consciousness of black women. In her essay, “And the Deliverance of Discipleship,” Grant rescues “servant hood” language from its oppressive and subordinating context in which black women are servants to the servants by calling for discipleship instead. Women must be empowered to become disciples, she argues, followers of Christ (216). The triple consciousness of black women anticipates and participates in this discipleship. It gives them “the possibility of experiencing a liberating Jesus even as they [are] given a racist and sexist one (212).” Although Patricia L. Hunter does not call it a third form of consciousness, in her essay, “And God Said, That’s Good,” she explores the “passion-power” of women and the systemic conspiracy that has been at work to prevent women of color from knowing it (191). “Each tool of oppression and prejudice must be confronted and dismantled,” writes Hunter including a reading of Genesis that renders the dominant male culture good and women of color less than good. Hunter calls upon women of color to be in touch with their passion (and rage) as a gift of God’s good Creation -- a gift that has helped the entire African-American community survive and will continue to facilitate healing (192).

Praxis

Hunter’s call to women of color is met by many other suggested praxis throughout this collection of essays. In “The Justification of Goodness in the Face of Manifold Evil,” Rosita DeAnn Mathews offers her own story as a chaplain with which to explore institutional racism (101). Succeeding individually in a corporate, political or ecclesiastical system, she claims, requires one to use “power from the periphery (93).” This approach rules out using evil to fight evil. Rather, the black women deny the aggressor the opportunity to define their method of resistance (93, 97). Jesus’ ministry and interactions with the religious system of his day provides a paradigm for black women in institutional life. He neither ran from nor acquiesced to it; rather he moved to the center and purged its sinfulness and despair (99, 106).

Marcia Y. Riggs draws lessons from the Black women’s club movement at the end of the 19th century in her essay “The Response of the Black Women’s Club Movement to Institutionalized Moral Evil.” Riggs locates Black liberation ethics in the moral suasion, social activism of the movement’s socio-religious paradigm (3). The National Association of Colored Women, for example, adopted the

motto "Lifting as We Climb" to manifest an interconnectedness that wed racial obligation and responsibility with a belief in the uplifting nature of God's justice. She sees this as a corrective to contemporary individualism and class alienation within the larger society, as well as within the black community (74-75).

Guided by the rhetoric and activity of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Townes constructs a womanist ethic for the elimination of suffering in her essay "The Rhetoric and Movement of Liberation in the House of Evil." Moving away from the moral valuing of loss, denial, and sacrifice (which compromises the emotional and spiritual health of both women and men), Townes argues that Christian mission must be done in the context of authority and obedience. Authority for Townes does not signify domination, but partnership, cooperation, and mutual decision-making (86). Obedience, then, is not a self/other relationship but a responsibility to discover God's will and a decision about what must be done (87).

Martin echoes this new understanding in her call for a praxis of "active oppositional engagement against racial suffering and evil", which she considers the highest form of obedience to God (22). African-American women, Townes argues, must practice a thorough hermeneutic of suspicion and investigate the conditions of daily life in order to free them and others of injustices and social, political, and theo-ethical control. The horizon a womanist ethic moves toward, she insists, "is a society that is uncompromisingly rooted in justice and fueled by people who use their hope to construct and enact meaningful and significant social change (89)."

Gilkes believes that the ethical challenge is to live out the mandates of love -- including self-love -- in a hateful and exploitative world. This is most often seen in "the testifying of religious experience and transforming individual victories over stumbling blacks into prophetic resources for the larger community (233)." The ability of black women to resist is dependent on how widely they share the multiple dimensions of oppression (236). Black men also have an obligation to remove the lens of sexism through which they view the world (40). Only a collaborative participation from all races and ethnicities, males and females, rich and poor will overcome the social sins of racism, Phelps argues. Jesus was crucified, she writes, because he signaled a change in the social, political, and religious institutions of his day, yet joy came at the resurrection (61-62).

Working through these interdisciplinary essays was both a painful and hopeful experience. Risking what Wildman described as analogizing, I can say that some of this pain and hope is shared by white women. However, slavery, defilement, servitude, and disparagement are concentrated in the experiences of black women. This collection is important as both an introduction to the wide-range of womanist methodologies as well as to the problem of evil and suffering. The "rock" of racism and sexism is real -- formed and sustained by both individual acts and social sins. It is less in the suffering of Christ crucified than in his passion to overturn the dominant powers of the day, less in control over than in discipleship that the human community will overcome this evil.

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. I am reminded of Tim Wise's story of a workshop in which blacks and whites were asked what they were proud of as blacks and whites. The whites had little to say. Here the womanists have much to say and many historical and contemporary legacies to draw upon. What voices do white feminist theologians lift up? What do we say about our whiteness?
2. Similarly, if "[s]pirituals are ritual components of a collective exorcism in which slaves [and civil rights activists] fight evil with the power constructs of freedom and justice through song," what do whites employ to exorcise their demons?
3. I think I've asked this before, but does a preoccupation with overcoming whiteness trivialize the suffering of nonwhites?
4. "Passion-power" is a potent concept. Could it be likened to Christ's passion? Can white women possess it?
5. Is there rage or anger amongst womanists as there is with Cone?