

Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil

A Conversation with Emilie Townes

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OCTOBER 4, 2007

Q: What is womanist theology generally, and specifically womanist ethics?

A: Womanist theology is something that grew out of a four-part definition from Alice Walker in her book, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. The definition came when she subtitled her book *Womanist Prose*, and her editor said, "What's that?" So she came up with a definition.

The first part of the definition stresses the importance of passing on wisdom and information from generation to generation among women. It also makes very clear the reality that sometimes youths ask questions that older folks don't want to hear or don't want to answer. It tries to address this issue without quenching that sort of youthful, inquisitive spirit.

The second part of the definition looks at the communal dimensions of womanist thought – which is several things. First, within African American communities there are a variety of sexual orientations – which is nothing new. For years this was treated as part of the fabric of the community. Second, there is the sense of the vast variety of colors within black life in the US. Finally, there are the responsibilities to really hold on to people and bring them along using the model of The Black Women's Club Movement: "lifting as we climb." That real strong sense is that your successes are not yours alone. When you do succeed, bring others with you – don't just make it a solo effort.

The third part of the definition looks at the kinds of stereotypes surrounding beauty and women, particularly black women, and debunks them. It begins and ends with loving oneself regardless. It takes on those often-deadly, usually unhealthy messages we all get around body type and image: styles that very few people fit.

The final definition is very short and is a critique of white feminist thought. It says 'womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.' This is Walker's way of talking about womanist thought as something much more complex. It incorporates race, gender and class, and not just gender and sexism, while being very clear that black women's lives have a sort of triple oppression.

So, out of something that she did not intend to be a critical, analytical, dense, theological discussion, some of us have tried to work through the theological implications of Walker's 'womanist prose.' Not as social issues, but as real, live theological issues around wisdom, around community, around beauty and around

critical thought. We then use them in our own disciplines so it becomes a methodology rather than a discipline in and of its self.

The way this looks in the practice of womanist ethics varies from womanist to womanist. We are all trained very differently depending on where we went to school. For me, as a social ethicist looking at theories and structures, it's using social history and traditional social ethics categories - as well as Christian ethics categories and theological ethics categories - in an integrated way to try and understand the nature of how is it we are to respond to God's call in our lives. How do we make those decisions? How do we see what's there?

Q: What is the main argument of your most recent book, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*?

A: The main argument is that we tend to use images – stereotypes and caricatures – as valid representations of ourselves, or each other, and don't understand the ways in which the imagination shapes these images. The book tries to find ways to disrupt that, if not dismantle it, so we can begin to genuinely deal with the business of who we are and understand how specific stereotypes become a lens through which we view particular issues: identity as property, empire and Christian triumphalism, public policy making and the unexamined religious values we hold, and race and racism which I call 'un-interrogated coloredness.' It is a way to talk about racism that consciously puts white folks into the equation, in opposition to the simple notion of darker skinned people being the problem. It is our collective human problem, and we have got to talk about it. Overall, we need to think through the kind of solidarity needed to do that work. How does this have a peculiar impact on us in the United States, as people of faith who are citizens of the Republic? We have some responsibilities to be engaged in the civic process, as people of faith. This is not the same thing as putting the church into the state, but rather through articulating where our values are and why.

Q: You have argued that everyone needs to think contextually. Is that a fair representation, or do some groups or peoples need to think more contextually than others?

A: I think we all need to do theology and ethics contextually. But I do not want to lose the theological dimensions of that. Sometimes when we talk about contextual ethics, we think we don't have to think about things like the nature of creation, the nature of love, etc., and I do not want to lose those. As long as contextual theology also pays close attention to the theological issues that make life what it is, fine.

But what I tend to shy away from is abstract theological thought that's not grounded in life. I don't find that helpful. We come up with all sorts of solutions to things that are nearly impossible to carry out practically. This stands in opposition to the first chapter of Genesis when creation is seen as good. I want to balance both these ideas.

Q: What would you say to people who are not African American? What can they learn from engaging your work?

A: It's about engaging somebody's ideas and thoughts. I'm not sure there's any kind of theological or ethical reflection that isn't particular. It's about taking that seriously. We'd like to think that there are universals, but we all speak out of our particular locations and what we see and think and feel. Some of us would like to think this is universal thought, but it is not. It's very much grounded in the things that we've been affected by and hear and learn and see and know.

Because I direct my work at the African American community to try and understand that community and bring the realities of that community to the fore, I try to avoid the sense of being a social project instead of a real live person. Thus, various forms of liberation thought – and womanist theology and ethics are certainly in this camp – are trying to bring the real business of people's lives into the conversation. In the case of this book – through an intellectual conversation. This can also function in local churches and religious communities to help us get to know the reality of who we are: all of us, not just the black community, but all of us. Then we might have some chance of getting at some sense of justice, and not always lean so heavily on love.

The conversation, then, is one in which I try and open up the world of black women so that, the more you hear my story, you might actually hear your story. You begin to see other groups and other people begin to see the echoes of how this has an effect. That's why I begin with a stereotype of a black woman in each chapter. The conversation is about something much larger, because it is a particular way to get in. And that's the way counter memory functions, both with literary thought, and theological and theo-ethical thought as well.