Into the New Millennium: The Impact of the Academy on the Church
Linda E. Thomas

Religion, Humanization, and World Transformation
Ai Ra Kim

Make It Plain; Make It Portable: Effective Sermon Images
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Introduction

New Voices for a New Day

Why are there no women-of-color theologians at any of our United Methodist-related seminaries? That was the question raised and discussed by members of the Women Administrators and Faculty, a network of professional women employed at United Methodist-related seminaries and participants at the 1987 Black Clergywomen's Consultation.

The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM), through its Office of Loans and Scholarships and Section on Elders and Local Pastors (Division of Ordained Ministry), recognized that theological education must be responsive to the needs of the church and society in the new millennium. More specifically, theological education simply must face the challenges of an increasingly culturally diverse student body that expects a more diverse and representative faculty.

Staff at GBHEM understood that by increasing the number of women of color who teach, write, and research at the Ph.D. level the academy would gain an abundance of fresh and provocative scholarship. And such scholarship could only enhance the training of seminary students and facilitate positive transformation in both academy and church.

During the weekend of October 15-17, 1999, a celebration/consultation of the Women of Color Scholarship and Mentoring Program was held at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. The purpose of the gathering was to highlight the program’s accomplishments since its inception in 1988. The
consultation recognized the theological and academic work of its eight graduates, six of whom are now teaching at United Methodist-related seminaries!

The Women of Color Scholarship and Mentoring Program could not have been successful had it not been for the support of the mentors, all of whom are recognized theological scholars. They are Rita Nakashima Brock, Bunting Institute; Katie Cannon, Temple University; Karen Collier, Fisk University; Jacquelyn Grant, Interdenominational Theological Center; Jung Ha Kim, Georgia State University; and Renita Weems, Vanderbilt University Divinity School. We deeply appreciate their continued support.

This issue of Quarterly Review contains the papers presented by the graduates at the October consultation. While the topics of the articles vary, reflecting the wide array of scholarly disciplines of the authors, a common concern underlies all of them: How can the theological reflection and expertise of women-of-color scholars challenge and expand the mission and ministry of the church and the academy? We believe that you will find the responses to this question in each article provocative and stimulating.

The Lectionary Study by Alyce McKenzie examines the soaring poetry of the Song of Songs and the seasoned wisdom of the book of Proverbs. Through deft exegesis and insightful application, McKenzie shows the relevance of “Woman Wisdom” to even our postmodern times.

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Into the New Millennium: The Impact of the Academy on the Church

I was called to the ministry at the age of twelve. Ten years later, in 1978, when I was a senior in college, I began my search for a seminary. I understood that by pursuing this path, I was taking a critical step in the ordination process. I had had conversations with several people—among them, Bishop Woodie White, who at that time was General Secretary of the General Commission on Religion and Race. He directed me with great enthusiasm to the 13 United Methodist-related seminaries. I did a thorough search of each seminary, looking for a combination of factors that I considered essential for my theological education.

First, I wanted a seminary that had a faculty with an extensive publishing record. Second, I was looking for a seminary whose ethos demonstrated a commitment to preparing women and men to be unabashedly Christian. Moreover, I desired an environment that cultivated both creative and critical reason and a passion for prophetic interaction. Third, I wanted a seminary to demonstrate a commitment to diversity. For me, this meant that in addition to white men there would be scholars of color and white women on the faculty, as well as a racially diverse student body. Diversity was a very important variable to me.

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because my four years of undergraduate studies did not include one course with or about a person of color. Moreover, there was no mention of a course that was important to communities of color. Realizing that my education was not fully rounded and that I had not had any scholarly role models who looked like me, I wanted my next educational venture to reflect diversity in an integrated manner.

In my judgment, the three criteria that I established could not be found in any United Methodist-related seminary in 1978. While Union Theological Seminary in New York City, the seminary I elected to attend, did not have any women-of-color faculty, it did have five African American men who were well published, at least four white women who were highly respected scholars, and one Asian man who came from Japan to teach at the seminary. That diversity plus the other factors signaled to me the commitment to excellence and diversity that I was determined to have for preparing for ministry. And indeed, it was an excellent education. Throughout my formal and informal theological education, I was celebrated, affirmed, and significantly transformed for ministry.

The academy impacted the church directly through my ministry in two different United Methodist congregations. Both ministry experiences were very important to my development. The first was an inner-city congregation in Brooklyn, New York—a mission church with many beautiful children, youth, and adults. As the sole pastor, I experienced considerable ambivalence from the members—mostly women—who did not know how to deal with a young woman pastor who talked about Black theology and called God “God” instead of “He.” I loved the people despite their resistance. I worked with their children and youth and I stood by folks during their life struggles. I celebrated and affirmed people despite their negativity. They and I were transformed by the power of love made present in Jesus Christ.

My second appointment—a predominately white congregation in White Plains, New York—was comprised of a church membership of faithful people who had many spiritual questions that arose because of their affluence. I was part of a team ministry—the first African American and the first woman on the staff. There was little resistance because members knew it was time to diversify the clergy staff, and they quickly saw the benefits. More African American families came to the church. In addition, two women in the congregation accepted a call to ministry and are currently pastoring in the New York Annual Conference. This celebration of diversity, I believe, affirms all
persons, leads to transformation, and brings forth God’s commonwealth.

I believe that this celebration of diversity is the goal that Angella Current and Kathy Sage set for the Women of Color Scholarship and Mentoring Program (WOCSMP) in 1989 when—with the enthusiastic support of Roger Ireson, General Secretary of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry—they launched the program. As we enter the new millennium we ask with reference to the scholarship of women of color, both within and without the WOCSMP: “What is the impact of the academy on the church?” I propose that we explore the ideas, beliefs, and sociocultural issues associated with theological education and Christian ministry in the second millennium, with the intent of creating an inclusive vision for theological education in the third millennium. In other words, I ask, “What lessons have we learned about theological education and Christian ministry in the second millennium that may assist us as we embrace the third?”

Theological Education and Diversity

The first major lesson that we can learn is the challenge of normalizing diversity within theological education. The church in all ages has proclaimed, “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5, KJV). This verse offers hope and pushes us into the future. Likewise the church across the centuries has pondered the question raised by the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates: “How should one live?” Socrates’ query corresponds to a question that anthropologists ask and that the church examined during the Modern period: “How do and (should) we live together?” Anthropologists also inquire, “Who are we?” This, too, is a question that the church has explored through the ages and continues to contemplate today. A final set of questions emerges for both anthropologists and church leaders, although for different reasons: “How do we live with one another?” and “What do we do?” Anthropologists ask these questions out of a social-scientific interest in diversity and comparative studies. Christians ponder these questions because living together is the central tenet of the gospel and because it is “theologically correct” for diverse people to be able to be together in the church.

The challenge for theological education in the third millennium is not only for us to be together in the church and to live in a way that reflects the fact that we are related to one another; it is also to live in a
manner that reflects our responsibility for one another. This last principle becomes more difficult as we consider the tremendous variety that exists among people locally and globally. We live in a world that has a variety of societies that are constantly changing. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict suggested that we have devised a “great arc” of assorted procedures to labor, express, direct households, rule and command others, and to be fascinated with unknown things.

For anthropologists this “great arc” is the challenge that diversity brings to human social life. This has also been the challenge for theological education in the second millennium, because many institutions are not creatively handling issues of diversity. Since the world finds its way into the seminaries, schools of theology, divinity schools and churches through those who teach, educators must deal with this challenge in the new millennium. “We... hold on to things known and cherished, whether that be our possessions, our relationship, or even our identity. . . . We struggle to conserve the past even while we look eagerly for that which is yet to come. What contrary creatures we are.” This is precisely why there can be hope for theological education and Christian ministry in the third millennium. We can have confidence, however, only if we learn from the past as we proceed into the future.

Diversity, Justice, and Power

The church and theological education have been driven by a history that structured a world based on dominance and subordination. The binary parallels that emerged during the European Enlightenment laid the groundwork for the scientific method and supported rigorous imperialism. There was movement away from oral traditions to written texts. An effort was made to shift from the particular to the universal. Local concerns gave way to general considerations, and temporal categories shifted from regard for timeliness to respect for timelessness. This was also the historical epoch during which missionaries were sent into the world to save indigenous peoples, who were often assumed to be less than human. This was a destructive period of history for the church because indigenous peoples were in many cases not valued, and their concrete histories were not recognized. How will theological education in the third millennium hear the histories of various peoples? How will it honor the
differences that can strengthen the body of Christ and open our educational processes and epistemologies?

Our world is plagued with atrocities that are predicated upon dominant and subordinate roles in public and private life. The task of theological education and Christian ministry is to create avenues for justice that will recast power imbalances. Even as concrete histories have been denied, theological education must advance opportunities in which structural power can respond to new questions and exhibit adaptability rather than retrace positions in the service of self-protection. We must ask questions such as, How do we view the histories and traditions of theological education and the academy in light of diversity? Or as Louise Lamphere in Structuring Diversity asks, How do we structure diversity for positive results? Finally, we must ask, How do we associate with one another in the midst of compelling diversity? These are some of the paramount considerations we must examine as we begin the new millennium.

Whether we look at theological education from a global perspective or from a North American perspective, we must deal with the vast assortment of human cultures and the enormous depth that a distinct way of life has relative to communication, local issues, and the monetary, political, and spiritual aspects of life. This complexity compels the theological educator to ask, What is the recipe for a significant ministry amidst such complex human diversity? What do I need to understand about my own culture and the particular cultural assumptions I bring to theological education?

My response to these questions is that we must understand theological education as a dynamic unfolding of events that involves "change, creation and re-creation, interpretation and re-interpretation." Michael Carrithers suggests that these are not processes which occur occasionally and exceptionally, but are rather the very stuff of human social life. Even when we do something that seems traditional, we do so in new conditions, and so are in fact re-creating tradition rather than simply copying it.

A significant theological education in the third millennium will embrace diversity precisely in order to realize the fullness of God's kingdom that we are calling into existence. A significant ministry in that millennium will demonstrate in its practice that we are not bound solely by our own traditions or our own unreflective views of human

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nature. We can and must learn to appreciate the validity of other people's ways of viewing Christianity and of understanding faith. Only then can a tolerant church emerge. We need a change of focus that moves from the academy and seminaries to their peripheries. We must move from a static meaning of ministry to a dynamic meaning consisting of flexible processes in which all people are involved.

**Signs That Change Is Necessary**

The second lesson we have learned about theological education and the Christian ministry in the second millennium that may assist us in the third explores the relationship between modernity and the epistemology of the European Enlightenment. Theological education in the second millennium continues to be influenced by the Enlightenment's privileging of science and its attendant epistemology. However, there are signs that this scientific positivism is decaying. And for growing segments of the academy and the church traditional theological understandings beholden to positivism are no longer the only consideration. Whether we call this the “end of modernity” or the demise of the Enlightenment’s grip, the fact is we are moving away from particular forms of political dominance. This movement pushes us to a postmodern period as we enter the third millennium, meaning that new interpretations of reality are expected, new epistemological approaches are warranted, and options of power are fluid.

The Enlightenment and its influence upon many academic disciplines and the church are now receding. Moreover, during modernity various communities, particularly peoples of color throughout the world, have pressed against the essential claims of modernity because such claims put a burden on the backs of the peoples that Europe conquered and colonized. In my view, communities of color that have been historically oppressed have always lived out of a reversal of Enlightenment epistemology. It is only now, during the postmodern period, that particular segments of the European and the Amer-European communities are severely questioning the adequacy of Enlightenment thought. Many European descendants of the Enlightenment are now, as Stephen Toulmin suggests, accepting as plausible that which is oral, particular, local, and timely—categories that marginalized communities have found central.

Langdon Gilkey outlines four reasons for the movement toward
postmodernism. The first is that the knowledge obtained in a "future-shock" world has yielded much technology that has shown itself to be ambiguous and potentially destructive to humankind and the earth. The good that technology is potentially capable of producing is also life threatening. Second, the political guarantees of the Enlightenment have not brought shalom; instead they have yielded repression fueled by dangerous convictions and executed by vain leaders. Third, Gilkey claims that we have caused God's saving activities in history to cease because Western culture has failed in its attempt to triumph against evil. Moreover, the religious essence of the Enlightenment developed over and against the salvation history portrayed in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. In other words, the assumptions about progress are questionable. Finally, Gilkey suggests that the formative presence of world religions has loosened the controlling claims of Western religion.

Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* calls into question the category of objectivity in the scientific community, thus indirectly challenging the objectivist claims asserted by Western religions. Against the prevalent notion that scientific knowledge is objective because "unbiased," Kuhn argues that objectivity in the scientific community is in fact a matter of consensus. That is, prominent scientists may promote a specific idea or project to the general public as based on "objective fact"; however, says Kuhn, objectivity here really means that the idea or project carries the endorsement of the scientific community. Similarly, Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* asserts that scientific knowledge is held in trust from generation to generation; it is knowledge that builds on a previous knowledge base. He argues that knowledge is constructed by humans and accordingly is not objective in a positivistic sense.

Both Kuhn and Polanyi maintain that we are in a period of liminality when it comes to the construction of knowledge, which means that we are also in a creative moment of reinterpretation. Such reinterpretation calls forth new paradigms for theological education that assume mutuality among all people as well as the valuing of differences. The church and the academy of the third millennium, therefore, have a new task. Walter Brueggemann puts the task this way:

It is clear on many fronts, not only in theology but in very many disciplines, that the old modes of knowing that are Euro-American, male, and white, no longer command respect and credibility as objective and universally true. Indeed, older
modes of assertion about reality have an increasingly empty ring, even if we do not understand all the reasons for change.¹⁵

Theological education in the third millennium must recognize and take seriously the current conditions of our intellectual environment, which can be described as being contextual, local, and diversified. While Descartes wanted to objectify knowing, suggesting that it was not relevant to context, we understand that our knowing is directly related to our social location. People who have lived in historically oppressed communities have always known that reality is viewed differently depending upon one’s social location. That we view history and reality through different lenses is a point that liberation theologians and ethicists—both female and male—have articulated. While some scholars dismiss theologies that emerge out of particular conditions, the strength of these theologies is precisely that their articulated categories arise from particular perspectives. Of course, so do the categories of all other scholarship, including those of scholars who claim to be impartial and universal! Contextualism claims that the knower helps to construct what is known and that the material reality of the knower influences both what is known and how something is known.

Knowledge is contextual and local; this means that it is not possible to speak one all-encompassing truth. Instead, one can voice local truth and search for its applicability to other places. Localization of truth has implications for theological education in the third millennium: what we have understood to be the teachings of an omnipresent, infinite, and boundless knowledge base is in fact local and limited, not universal.¹⁶

Theological education in the third millennium will recognize that knowledge is contextual, local, and diverse and, therefore, that there is a diversity of views. This means that the dominant paradigm, which excludes the particularity of women of color and usually leaves them out of the conversation, can no longer stand as the voice representing all. Valuing different views is an alternative to objectivity, since there is no longer a center of dominance imposing one view and trying to silence dissenting voices.

Theological Education and Hegemony

The third lesson we can learn from in the new millennium is about theological education and hegemony. Theological education in the
third millennium must have bishops, presidents, and deans who understand the nuances of their own particular culture and who remember that the truth which emerges in local contexts is constructed in a diverse world and has no privilege. Leaders must remember that old ways of knowing are in transition. Brueggemann makes this point persuasively:

We are now able to see that what has passed for objective, universal knowledge has in fact been the interested claim of the dominant voices who were able to impose their view and to gain either assent or docile acceptance from those whose interests the claim did not serve. Objectivity is in fact one more practice of ideology that presents interest in a covert form as an established fact.  

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There is a tremendous amount of diversity within theological education. Even within the categories of Protestant or Catholic, liberal or conservative, there is enormous variety. Each person in theological education lives out meaning from a decided perspective that coexists in a world with opposing perspectives. In the new millennium, it will be prudent for us to practice the valuing of differences and to acknowledge that there are myriad ways of viewing the world. Moreover, as we advocate particular viewpoints, we must do so appreciating perspectives at variance from our own. We must comprehend that the lens through which we look gives us a specific point of view that has to do with the way we experience life. We should also understand that we will never be able to prove that our views are universal. While we may give up our lives for the beliefs that we hold, we must remember that our views emerge from a certain reading of reality. In the third millennium we must move from unilaterally asserting hegemony to taking local context seriously. For instance, people from marginalized communities in the United States know that there is a nervousness or fear among many Amer-Europeans about the demise of the “white, male Western world of colonialism.”  

18 Occasionally I am invited to give workshops on diversity in the corporate sector. More often than not, top management decides that it is good business for employees to understand diversity as it pertains to relationships among employees and to employees’ relationships with local and global customers. In other words, decisions to do diversity work are made by those at the top of the organization: white males.
What is interesting to me is that those who most resist participating in diversity workshops are usually white males. Because some white males have decided that diversity work is important, and others have resisted it, I must conclude four things:

• There is great diversity among white males.
• White males have considerable power, despite a climate implying that the careers of white males are threatened.
• It is good for corporations to acknowledge that women and men of color and white women have significant contributions to make in corporations and to invest in their products.
• White males do have a voice—and power—in every aspect of our society, even as we experience the demise of affirmative action and an increase in complaints about reverse discrimination.

Theological education in the third millennium will continue to articulate the voice of white males, but it will no longer be privileged; nor will this voice be an unchallenged authority. In other words, the credibility of white-male perspectives will continue to be questioned. Such questioning means that many dominant folks will feel threatened. Correspondingly, marginalized communities—particularly communities of color—will be even more at risk. Racism, sexism, and heterosexism will become more blatant. This shifting paradigm affects the economy, too, and will have implications for jobs, business, law enforcement, and healthcare. Patterns in homes, relations between people of different genders and sexual orientations, and the family will be affected. Brutality will be justified in local and global arenas. The collapse of the old system will be potent and profound and will no doubt engender a backlash consisting of rhetorical and physical tools mobilized by the old system in reaction to the threat of its imminent demise.

The passing of the old order not only has pragmatic effects; it also has theological implications for the academy and the church in the millennium. A new politics of valuing diversity in theological education is emerging, expressed well by Cornel West’s comment on prophetic vision:

[W]e promote a prospective and prophetic vision with a sense of possibility and potential, especially for those who bear the social costs of the present. We look to the past for strength, not
solace; we look at the present and see people perishing, not profits mounting; we look toward the future and vow to make it different and better.19

Imaging Theological Education in the Third Millennium

The final lesson is a direct challenge to the leaders of our theological institutions. Moving from hegemony to valuing differences provides a great opportunity for theological education in the new millennium to shift from rationalist paradigms to theological models that use imagination. What do I mean? Consider for a moment that 11 years ago the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry had no strategy for its 13 theological seminaries to have faculties that included women-of-color scholars. Surely the collaborative work of Angella Current and Kathy Sage can be described only as an act of imagining. They initiated a process that resulted in a proposal to Dr. Roger Ireson for a women-of-color scholarship program with the goal that all 13 seminaries become fully inclusive.20 We can ask the women of color who have completed this program or who are in the program currently, Did you not enroll in Ph.D. programs to imagine a change in your lives and in the life of the academy and theological education? I want to suggest that imagination is the process by which people conceive, envision, picture, conjecture, and fantasize about reality. When Angella Current, Kathy Sage, and later Karen Collier, Lynn Scott, and mentors Katie Cannon, Jackie Grant, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Renita Weems imagined a productive and successful program that would graduate women of color (the daughters of our foremothers, many of whom had neither the opportunity and support nor the encouragement to pursue higher education), they dreamed a world into reality—a world that celebrates, affirms, and is transforming theological education. The women who were and are part of the scholarship program are first of all committed to Jesus Christ and the ministry of the church. Their presence as teachers in United Methodist-related seminaries—even in non-United Methodist-related seminaries—will usher in new life in the academy and The United Methodist Church. With Justo Gonzalez I believe that we must live out the future to which God is moving an imagined church of the third millennium:
O]ur church and our witness must be multicultural, not simply because our society is multicultural, not simply because the future from which God is calling us is multicultural. We must be multicultural, not just so that those from other cultures may feel at home among us, but also so that we may feel at home in God's future. We must be multicultural because, like John at Patmos, our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; because we know and we believe that on that waking-up morning when the stars begin to fall, when we gather at the river where angel feet have trod, we shall all, from all nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages, sing without ceasing: "Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee, casting down our golden crowns before the glassy sea; cherubim and seraphim; Japanese and Swahili; American and European, Cherokee and Ukrainian; falling down before thee, which wert, and art, and evermore shall be!" Amen!21

What a compelling image this is of the church and theological education in the third millennium! It is an image that takes seriously God's call to us today for a future that will push us to new dimensions. The world in which we live at present is itself an imagined world. But because it is the world that is established, it is tempting to legitimize it as the only world. However, this is not so; other worlds can be imagined. I was captured by the vision of the world expressed by the "I Dream a World" photo exhibit that toured museums in the United States in the latter half of the 1980s. It was an exhibit of 100 black women who changed the United States. Because of the way that history is taught, it may be hard for some people in our society to even consider that there were 100 black women who transformed this country. While black women's history is not center stage in United States historiography, the "I Dream a World" exhibit brought to the fore a dream that helped me and other women and men to strive forward to transform the world.

People who have historically been oppressed are constantly imagining, visioning, and dreaming a new reality. This process was the center of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" message to the world in 1963. It was also the center of the dream put forth by the founders of the WOCSP, the women-of-color-scholars themselves, and more extensively by the academy and The United Methodist Church. These people and institutions continue birthing this dream.
The "I Dream a World" exhibit, King’s dream, and the WOCSMP are all alternatives to the present world in which we live.

In *Imagining God* Garrett Green argues that what is important in the imagining process is to make a distinction between Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians to live “as if” and the contrasting view to live “as.” To live “as if” signals that we are trying to live other than the way life really is. We put energy into opposing another reality. Alternatively, to live “as” means that we live the reality we imagine; therefore, there is no other reality to consider. If I live as a free person, then I am a free person. This is what Nelson Mandela did during his 27 years as political prisoner on Robben Island. We also know of persons with life-threatening illnesses who have lived as healthy people with a body free of disease and have shown dramatic improvement. This is the power of the women who are in the women-of-color scholarship program. These women take Green’s argument a step further: instead of “living as” they “take action as,” which means that through the energy of their study, they take action and claim the things that they want to exist.22

Theological education in the third millennium requires that we either “live as” or “take action as”—which is very different from Paul’s injunction to live “as if.” These are the lessons that we can learn from those who have had to imagine a new world which will replace the contradictions of the academy experienced during the second millennium.

There are many significant possibilities for theological education in the third millennium. Will we dare to believe in the radical nature of having a woman of color on the theological faculty of our seminaries? Will seminaries create opportunities for these women to be on their faculties—even if there is no slot open—just so that the quality of the education of future spiritual leaders can be enhanced? I hope that we will dream a world for theological education in the third millennium. May we be bold enough to do so.

Notes

1. This question and the others that follow in this paragraph are drawn from Michael Carrithers, *Why Humans Have Cultures: Explaining Anthropology and Social Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1.
7. Carrithers, 2.
8. Ibid., 9.
9. Ibid.
10. See Carrithers, 190-220, for comments on what is required in order to have tolerant civilizations.
11. This term was coined by George "Tink" Tinker, professor of American Indian Culture and Religious Traditions at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 11.
20. Angela Current is executive director of the Office of Loans and Scholarships at the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Kathy Sage pastors a church in Rochester, NY, and is a former staff member of the Division of Ordained Ministry of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Roger Ireson is general secretary of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and has provided significant encouragement and support for the women-of-color scholarship program.
Rosetta E. Ross

Religion and Civic Life: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as a Metaphor for What Love Requires

The word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying: Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Zechariah 7:8-10

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?” ... And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Matthew 25:37-38, 40

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them.

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Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."


The task of the Christian ethicist is to reflect on morality and to explore the meaning of the moral life from the perspective of Christianity. This exploration includes contemplating the responsibility of individual Christians, as well as probing the corporate responsibility of the church. Christian ethicists have written volumes to attend to this task, including some which ask whether there is any particular significance to examining morality through a Christian lens. Since many moral principles—do no harm, always render aid, and so forth—are commonly accepted without reference to Christian norms, there is validity to inquiries questioning the particular significance of Christianity to moral life. At the same time, the principal norm guiding Christian morality—agape, or neighbor love—is often seen as requiring and inspiring superlative moral practice because of its origin in and relationship to the divine good.

Many moral acts motivated by philosophical principles independent of the divine good may not appear to be distinct from those motivated by Christian agape. In this article I argue that the divine good is a superlative and more justifiable basis for determining moral norms. I claim that without some specified, comprehensive moral end, moral norms at any point may devolve into rationalizations for prevailing traditions of social practice which, by their very nature, diminish qualitative change. I argue that Christian agape requires and inspires certain moral actions. My purpose is to point to the responsibility of individual Christians and church bodies, including, but not limited to, The United Methodist Church, to practice a neighbor love whose end supersedes prevailing traditions of social practice by attending first to the least (Matt. 25:40). For if the moral practice of individual Christians and of the church is limited to rationalized norms (which frequently coincide with expediency or with what the letter of the law requires), many people will be pushed or left outside the circle of
those experiencing the full benefit of formalized social life. Consequently, in this essay I explore the positions of margin and center as shifting points, depending on which norms guide determinations about political rights.

I

In a 1967 essay entitled “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” Alice Walker states that the civil-rights movement awakened in persons the possibilities of life. For some, these possibilities were quite ordinary: being well fed, having “meaningful, well-paying” jobs to purchase and maintain homes, having the liberty to attend college, and the like. Generally, Walker saw the civil-rights movement as providing previously excluded people with opportunities to make choices about their life situations from the range of options available to all citizens. On the other hand, the full vision of the civil-rights movement, which included attending to the ordinary and the extraordinary, was quite “transformative and inclusionary.” To be sure, the civil-rights movement sought to address mundane concerns about the relatively deprived and oppressed material state of most African Americans; however, the movement also sought the full inclusion of persons from all stations of society at every level of public life. Moreover, it advocated a reordering of economic structures to redefine the situation of the country’s poor people. Although never fully systematized as achievements sought on the basis of particular activities, the civil-rights norm of participatory democracy and the five tenets of the Poor People’s Campaign clearly illustrate inclusion and economic reordering as broad goals of the civil-rights movement. The Poor People’s Campaign sought:

- A meaningful job at a living wage for every employable citizen
- A secure and adequate income for all who cannot find jobs or for whom employment is inappropriate
- Access to land as a means of income and livelihood
- Access to capital as a means of full participation in the economic life of America
- Recognition by law of the right of people affected by government programs to play a truly significant role in determining how they are designed and carried out.
The vocation of Christians as practitioners of neighbor love includes attending to both Walker’s assertions and the tenets of the Poor People’s Campaign; that is, to awaken for persons the ordinary possibilities of life and to transform the ordinary to make it more inclusive. In the language of Christian theology, practicing neighbor love means attending to the least. When transferred to political life, the significance of Christian agape as a norm governing moral practice is precisely its focus on the least, since seeking to secure the ordinary requirements of life—especially for “ordinary” people—often proves objectionable to conventional, rationalized standards of political life in the United States.

An example of such an objection and of the responsibility of neighbor love is seen in the story of Fannie Lou Hamer and her quest to participate fully in ordinary political life through the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

At its national convention in 1964, the Democratic Party—especially its credentials committee—was charged to respond to a challenge by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that it (the MFDP) was the authentic delegation representing all Democrats in Mississippi. Freedom Democrats based this charge on the fact that poor people and black persons were being shut out from participation in regular Party proceedings across the state. Two things are quite remarkable about the 1964 MFDP delegation. First, the group included a real cross-section of the population of the Mississippi Delta—professionals and non-professionals, the educated and the illiterate, men and women, young and old, black and white—thus actually representing the “demos,” the people commonly populating the region. Today it is still unusual for political-party delegations to include such a diversity of people. Second, it was unlikely then (and it’s even more unlikely now) that such a group would be formally received and given serious consideration in proceedings at this level of our country’s political life. By bringing the issue to the Democratic Party’s national convention, in full view of the national media, Freedom Democrats challenged not only Democratic Party politics but also put the following questions squarely on the national agenda: Who are citizens and foreigners within our public life? Can people from the margins meaningfully participate in the traditional center of civic life in this society? When meaningful participation in the center is understood as participating in the ordinary, a question arising from the norm of agape is this: What does it mean to love our neighbors as ourselves if our neighbors are the least—the widows, the orphans, the foreigners, the lame?

Founded as protest movement against the complete exclusion of
African Americans by the traditional Mississippi Democratic Party, the MFDP prepared a strong challenge to the Democratic Party delegation from Mississippi scheduled to attend the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Orchestrated by a former organizer in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Ella Baker, with support from local Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) workers and other civil-rights advocates around the country, the MFDP argued strongly that the Democratic Party in Mississippi had failed to allow full participation of all its members and announced in advance that it intended to pursue this challenge at the National Convention in Atlantic City. In talking with members of the credentials committee around the nation, the MFDP felt that unseating the traditionalist, all-white Mississippi delegation was at least a realizable goal.

With the challenge widely publicized and with major media attention focused on the convention, much of the activity related to Freedom Democrats was covered on national television. Discussions about what would happen to MFDP delegates during the 1964 Atlantic City Convention quickly turned into public deliberation about the forms of exclusion and lack of recognition that the civil-rights vision sought to overcome. This deliberation demonstrated the power of ordinary political practices to exclude certain classes of people from democratic political life.

Various political players examined and negotiated ways to resolve the conflict over the Freedom Democrats. Some of the most prominent of these were Hubert Humphrey, a senator from Minnesota, who was seeking the nomination for vice president; Walter Mondale, at that time a Minnesota state official and Humphrey's protégé; Martin Luther King, Jr., president of the SCLC; Bob Moses, Mississippi organizer for the SNCC; labor attorney Joseph Rauh; Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers Union; and Roy Wilkins, national director of the NAACP. However, two persons central to the debate who best symbolized the categories of citizen and foreigner, center and margin, never actually spoke with each other; nor did they participate directly in talks that determined the outcome of the conflict over the Freedom Democrats. Both participated only indirectly in the conflict; one of them chose an indirect role, while the other was deliberately excluded from participating. The dynamics of how each participated in the conflict, as well as their physical proximity to what actually occurred, is a powerful symbol of how United States society...
has defined—and often continues to define—who are citizens and who deserve to participate in the center of civic life. Let me explain.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson was at the center of power in the Democratic Party. Having assumed office after John F. Kennedy’s assassination, Mr. Johnson was expected to easily win the Party’s nomination and the election since he was an incumbent. As president, Johnson also was at the center of the interests of United States society. In contrast to President Johnson, MFDP vice president and one of its vocal leaders, Fannie Lou Hamer, was at the margin of the Democratic Party as a member of an alternative group that challenged traditional Party practices in Mississippi and in the country. As a poor, semiliterate, black woman from the rural South, who had only recently obtained the right to vote, Mrs. Hamer also was a “foreigner” to conventional political life, seeking to become a full citizen in United States society. Hamer was a profound representation of the vision of the possibilities of life proffered during the civil-rights period. Moreover, as a participant in black religion and as a representative of the sort of religious vitalities that inspire activities of renewal and protest, Hamer’s participation represented the power of an agape that attends to widows, orphans, aliens, and the poor. Her role in the MFDP was made possible by many who understood divine good as allowing Hamer to participate.

Johnson’s and Hamer’s influence on the Freedom Democrats controversy coincided with their social status. From the White House, Johnson influenced deliberations of the credentials committee. He worked feverishly in advance to avoid a convention debate over the MFDP. [Believing that seating the Freedom Democrats would threaten his bid for president, he] rejected as ludicrous the idea of seating both delegations. . . . [Johnson said:] “If we mess with the group of Negroes . . . we will lose fifteen states without even campaigning.” He instructed his political friend James Rowe to identify and target every MFDP supporter on the convention’s Credentials Committee.5

In his position at the center of society, controlling the decision from afar without appearing to be in the middle of the debate, President Johnson determined the outcome of the challenge from Washington, where he stayed until the Freedom Democrats were defeated. Hamer, on the other hand, even though she was a leader in the MFDP and
present in Atlantic City—the physical center of the debate—was unable to significantly impact the outcome of the deliberations, this notwithstanding the fact that she had traveled to Atlantic City for the express purpose of influencing discussions and being seated during the convention.

While the credentials committee was debating behind closed doors the merits of the challenge presented by the Freedom Democrats, Humphrey and other party representatives were in the senator's hotel room negotiating with MFDP representatives. Although she testified before the credentials committee, Fannie Lou Hamer was prevented from substantial participation in the negotiations. In the one meeting where Hamer was present, she scolded Senator Humphrey, who, seeking to secure his nomination for vice president, served as the president's mediator and resisted pressing the MFDP cause. "[Y]ou're a good man, and you know what's right," Hamer told Senator Humphrey. "The trouble is, you're afraid to do what you know is right." After that direct challenge of the senator, Hamer was excluded from further negotiation sessions.6

Although Freedom Democrats went into the National Convention with more than enough support on the credentials committee to ensure that their challenge would be debated on the floor of the convention, that support began to shift after committee members began experiencing pressure from President Johnson. At one point during the deliberations a compromise was offered: Two men from the MFDP delegation (not chosen by the Freedom Democrats) would be seated in a special section outside the regular Mississippi location. Freedom Democrats voted to reject the compromise. A statement by Fannie Lou Hamer accurately represented the perspective of most MFDP delegates: "We didn't come all this way for no two seats."7 Although negotiations continued in the hotel room with MFDP representatives, from the room of the credentials committee Walter Mondale announced unanimous acceptance of the compromise on national television. Mondale's action accomplished through power politics what Senator Humphrey symbolically stated as President Johnson's position on the MFDP and especially on Fannie Lou Hamer back in the hotel room: "The President will not allow that illiterate woman to speak on the floor of the convention,"8 Humphrey said.

Johnson and Hamer symbolized the extremes of margin and center in two ways. First, from the perspective of political rights as determined solely by conventional, rationalized norms, Johnson was at
the center. Second, when Christian agape is the norm governing political
rights "margin" and "center" shift. Now Hamer and the cause she
represented (embodied in the MFDP) become the standard, placing
Johnson on the margin. Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, and other
civil rights leaders who participated in discussions about the
Johnson-Hamer debacle put forward intermediate positions. King's and
Wilkins's positions had much to do with their social and political standing
at the time. Civil rights for African Americans were being debated around
the country. King and the SCLC (which burst on the scene with the
Montgomery Bus Boycott) and Roy Wilkins with the NAACP (and its
long-standing record of civil rights court battles) were central to the
civil rights debate bounded by norms from the traditional center of political
life. This gave King and Wilkins informal recognition in society and at the
Democratic Convention. Their informal recognition accorded them not
only the power to either include or marginalize Hamer and the MFDP from
the center of the civil rights community but also the political standing to
participate in marginalizing Hamer and the MFDP from regular
Democratic Party proceedings.

Mondale's announcement of a compromise with the MFDP can be
interpreted as the virtual end of any hope of achieving the movement's
vision for the full political inclusion of the least, those most marginalized
from traditional political life, as a significant agenda item in United States
politics. This event also serves to clarify class, gender, and power
distinctions within the civil rights community, since both SCLC and
NAACP leaders collaborated with the decision to exclude Fannie Lou
Hamer from negotiations and also advocated accepting the "two-seat"
compromise. The final outcome of the MFDP challenge not only excluded
Mrs. Hamer but also effectively barred the entire MFDP delegation from
participation in the 1964 convention. Hamer did not play an influential role
in negotiations at the convention. However, as a result of the media
attention brought about by the MFDP challenge, and particularly as a result
of her own role in the MFDP cause, Hamer did participate in national,
public debate about the issue of inclusion. Mrs. Hamer's role in national
debate resulted from the norm of participatory democracy practiced within
the MFDP and by those civil rights advocates who helped bring her to
national attention. This is an example of the practice of neighbor love; it is
also an important aspect of one stream of the broad civil rights vision.

II

Even though it was impossible for Mrs. Hamer to speak from the
floor of the Democratic National Convention, through her efforts and those of others the civil-rights movement in the United States brought sweeping changes to the society’s public policies and morality. Deriving from perspectives about what constitutes a good society, which issued in vitalities that gave birth to particular sets of activities, the civil-rights movement was social practice seeking to realize a vision of specific moral ends. Generally, the moral ends of the movement were to ensure the recognition of all persons—especially African Americans—as members of the human community. More specifically, the political goals for African Americans on the part of the civil-rights movement included full participation in democratic processes of the country; equal rights and access to goods, services, and other benefits of citizenship; and the end of police brutality and other types of violence and abuse against African Americans. To achieve these moral ends and to fulfill these political goals, civil-rights proponents opposed social conventions and engaged public institutions and public-policy processes seeking to influence, enforce, and develop means to achieve the overall goal of the civil-rights movement for a more just society. To achieve movement ends, tens of thousands of people participated in activities around the country—especially in the South—because they were captivated by the vision and the possibility of making a new society.

The people who were captured by the civil-rights vision and who led its activities were motivated by religious and nonreligious perspectives of the good society. But their motivations coalesced to create vitalities that gave birth to an era of civil-rights activity. These vitalities—the motives, energy, and spirit of the time—birthed and sustained the vigor of civil-rights activities. These shared vitalities and activities superseded the particularity of individual participants in the movement. The sources for the movement’s vitalities were hope for a better society, faith in God and in greater possibilities of human life and effort, a shared sense of justice, and commitment to equality.

*Hope* is one of the most important sources of the vitality of the civil-rights movement. Theologically, hope may be defined as an “expectation of a good future which rests on God’s promise.” The basis of theological hope is the experience of God’s historic, liberating action and the anticipation of God’s continued action in history. Moreover, theological hope involves yearning for that which can, but may not, be fulfilled in history. Alongside theological hope in the civil-rights movement was human hope—the desire for what is
believed possible of realization. This hope recognizes possibilities deriving from human cooperation. Both theological hope (depending on God’s intervention) and human desire (depending on potential achievement that is based on human will) supplied the hope that nourished and nurtured the civil-rights movement. Both forms of hope benefitted from human imagination. Although civil-rights participants differed about when and how to achieve the movement’s goals, they were united in the object of the movement’s hope: a society in which attention to the marginalized serves as the measure of civic life.

Deeply connected to the hope of the civil-rights movement was faith. At least two types of faith animated the activism of people during the civil-rights era. The first had to do with the expectation of new possibilities based on trust in God. Deriving primarily from the tradition of Western Christianity, this theological faith understands God as original “initiator and agent of change.” Civil-rights practices were expressions of faith, responding to God’s activity in human lives. From this perspective the activities of civil-rights participants can be construed as a form of religious duty. This sense of duty operated on personal and communal levels. Individual participants described themselves as “doing God’s work” and as “dependent on God” in civil-rights practice. Mass community meetings during various direct-action campaigns motivated people in the work of the movement through speeches, songs, and sermons. The sermons often described the civil-rights movement as the movement of God in history. Moreover, God’s movement was understood not only as requiring and motivating individuals and communities of religious believers who supported the civil-rights cause; the divine activity also was understood to operate in the lives of people—believers and nonbelievers—who opposed the general vision and particular activities of civil-rights participants. Andrew Young, for example, tells of one elderly woman who saw God as the provider of safe passage through fire trucks and water hoses set up to stop demonstrations in Birmingham: “Great God Almighty done parted the Red Sea one mo’ time!” she exclaimed. Other civil-rights participants felt driven by their faith in greater possibilities for human life, resulting from “the sheer force of our collective determination” and effort. In this case, social transformation depended solely on the collective work of persons. Both religious faith and a kind of faith that may be described as “positive humanism” were sources of the vitality of the civil-rights movement.

While the civil-rights vision belonged to a broad, plural constituency, a shared sense of justice dominated the vision as it related particularly to
improving the material existence of African Americans as a social group and of all poor people as a social class. As the movement evolved, this sense of justice became more clearly articulated as an inclusion of “poor people” generally and as a judgment against formally structured inequality. The sense of justice envisioned during the civil-rights movement did not include attention to issues of gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, or any number of other determinants of persons’ exclusion in society. It is, however, accurate to assert that challenges to traditional notions of inclusion and exclusion brought by the civil-rights movement paved the way for many other previously marginalized people to advocate for societal recognition; it also stimulated a more comprehensive conception of justice. The civil-rights movement’s initial attention to the issue of marginalization through race thus became generalized and fruitfully nuanced by being applied to other oppressed persons in society. Martin Luther King, Jr., articulated the most substantive conception of this sense of justice as fully realized in his notion of “the beloved community.”

Intricately connected to the shared sense of justice in the civil-rights community was a perspective about equality. Far from the oft-debated question of whether equality means sameness, equality in the civil-rights movement related to circumstance. It reflected a “vision toward a redistributive agenda [which] promised an equality of condition [and] not just freedom from overt discrimination.” As a source of human dignity and citizenship, equality relates to the individual’s opportunity to make choices within a context similar in value and meaning to those of other human beings, especially of fellow citizens. In practice, and representing the best of the civil-rights vision, equality meant participatory democracy. Much more than simply enfranchisement, participatory democracy means full and mutual recognition of persons as citizens. Reflecting the influence of women’s traditions in civil-rights programs, participatory democracy values all voices; it especially makes room in democratic decision-making processes for those voices most marginalized from the center of public debate. In this regard, a significant achievement of the movement was making it possible for persons like Fannie Lou Hamer and others to participate in public debate; to influence public policy; and, in some cases, to hold public office. This achievement is noteworthy because these persons were different from the norm of public participants by virtue of their race, level of education, economic class, and gender.
The widespread, generalized, and persistent practices of participants in the civil-rights movement thus originated in and depended upon hope, faith, a shared sense of justice, and equality. The vigor and positive abandon with which this occurred reflected the willingness of persons to move outside the familiar (and in some cases the comfortable) and to take risks, actively trying to realize what they envisioned as a better world. For many civil-rights participants, this was a way of attending to the least (Matt. 25:40). Participatory democracy (as it originated and evolved in the civil-rights movement) highlighted the importance of recognizing and giving special attention to the most marginalized, asserting the need to seek out and determine mechanisms for including such persons. During the civil-rights movement, practicing participatory democracy meant that people with relative power entered places, seeking out the marginalized and creating space for and relinquishing power to them. Hundreds of people left relatively safe spaces of school, work, and the “North,” for example, to go to Mississippi and other areas of the South to recognize, to make space for, to give voice to, and to empower those most marginalized. This is how Fannie Lou Hamer’s courage and wisdom became a contribution to our national life. Activities involved in bringing Mrs. Hamer’s contribution to national life may be understood as works of love. The list of activities is varied and long, just as the ways of expressing love are many and diverse. Many persons went into rural Mississippi to teach about voting rights. Others prepared and encouraged Hamer to secure a voter-registration certificate. Some helped organize and carry through local processes of the MFDP. Still others helped organize the MFDP’s 1964 challenge. Yet others helped fund travel. These persons who left positions of relative privilege, safety, and comfort to empower persons like Hamer, though sustained by hope, faith, and justice commitments, exercised neighbor love—the mediatory practice of attending to processes which make ordinary and extraordinary possibilities of life available to those most marginalized from them. Hamer and others like her also exercised this neighbor love as they responded to options that such love provided and as they participated in empowering others.

The Democratic Party’s formal action against the MFDP helped to circumscribe the broad civil-rights vision and to decenter its participatory norm. Such grassroots participation at this level of
national politics was never seen again; nor has the Freedom Democratic Party returned to the National Convention since the 1964 challenge. As a result, persons most marginalized—and the society as a whole—lost the benefit of their opportunity to play a meaningful part in civic life. The political exclusion and lost opportunities experienced by Hamer and the Freedom Democrats continue today in the absence from meaningful civic participation of many people in the inner cities and rural areas. In both rural and urban areas persons most marginalized and most in need of the affirmation of social and civic participation also live daily in material conditions far different from what society deems normative for meaningful life. The circumstances of these people relate directly to the recent intense rise in what Cornel West calls “market mentalities.” By this West refers to prevailing traditions of social practice that simply accept the increase in homelessness and the escalation of violence and that seem to condone life choices based on the expansion of unbridled free-market capitalism. Yet both individuals and well-developed governments experience market forces as forms of oppression.

The ability of United States citizens to create and to thrive on the basis of natural human agency and potential is severely confined by economic considerations. Such confinement is reflected in the pervasive concern about “having enough”; in the ubiquitous codification of all aspects of human life as commodities for consumption; and in the extensive influence—even control—of market forces on human decision-making. The lives of both individuals and families reflect the influence of market rationality in countless ways. Our daily decisions and the ways we structure our existence must attend heavily to market forces. Movement of industry and lack of local opportunity in employment, for example, often limit our ability to relate fully to “loved ones.” These forces often cause persons to define family and community life as temporary, lived with persons who are geographically nearby. Furthermore, response to market forces in employment effectively narrows the conception of “family” to mean a nuclear unit of parent (or parents) and child (or children). Economic demands disrupt the existence of and continuity in communal life by requiring people to be mobile.

Moreover, economic demands influence the quality of life in neighborhoods and communities by locating industries in these communities based solely on economic motives, with little consideration given to human flourishing. For poor and poorly
educated persons living in inner cities and rural areas, this often means the disappearance of work because of the distance between home and employment or the lack of requisite job skills. In addition, these communities have to contend with various forms of industrial disturbance and pollution. In civic life, market rationality refers to the fact that public officials, from local to national levels, have relinquished the ability to govern to market forces. In the United States, for example, the presence of market rationality can be seen in the inability of federal officials to determine a minimum universal standard of health care. Or consider the exorbitant amounts of money spent on election campaigns at almost every level. This practice clearly illustrates the fact that market forces determine not only how persons govern but also, primarily through campaign financing, who will govern. Without campaign-finance reform, the growing trend of “celebrity politicians” will become normative, collaborating with economic factors to expand even more the numbers of people marginalized from meaningful participation in civic life.

To limit ourselves to behaviors that are no more than reactions to market rationality—seeking simply to maximize participation in and profit from the market economy—is to negate human agency and creativity; it is also neglect of what may be understood as a theological responsibility to actualize both of these human potentialities. Moreover, to concede that human agency is limited to mimicking or merely reacting to market rationality is to accede, if not to sanction, the tendency of economic forces to ignore and even debate and oppress the weak.

Does love matter in all of this? Do vitalities like those of the civil-rights movement, rooted in the social-justice traditions of religion, have any response to or responsibility for addressing the continued marginalization and material deprivation of people? During the civil-rights era, superlative persistence in challenging the ordinary caused sweeping social changes. These changes often originated in the consistent practice of mediating differences between social privilege and social disadvantage and between conceptions of divine good and material reality in order to improve life for the least. As institutions, churches serve this mediating purpose when their task involves mitigating conventional structures and processes that sustain marginalization. Individual Christians do this through practices of mutuality that seek to overcome imbalances caused by conventional social norms. This is what agape is, and this is what love requires.
Notes

1. By rationalized I do not mean ideas or principles that are based on reason; that is, rationalized does not equate to rational. In this article the term rationalized means what James Childress describes as justification of “actions by appealing to reasons that are not in fact the agent’s actual motives.” See James F. Childress, “Rationalization,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. by James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 527.


7. Branch, 474.

8. Ibid., 470.


11. Young, 223.

12. Marable, 333.


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Methodist missionaries began their work in the British West Indies during the late-eighteenth century. Under the leadership of Thomas Coke, several figures among the Methodists were devoted to the charge of taking the gospel to enslaved Africans. Men like William Hammett, John Baxter, Matthew Lumb, and others were prolific recorders of their experiences as evangelists and circulated a fair amount of internal correspondence pertaining to their efforts in the region. They either established or made serious attempts to establish missions in virtually every British West Indian colony from Jamaica to Tobago, including Grenada, Barbados, Saint Vincent, Saint Lucia, Nevis, Saint Christopher's, Saint Kitts, Antigua, and Tortola. Their records, supported by those of other denominational missionaries in the region, indicate that evangelizing Africans in colonial slaveholding societies was a very precarious enterprise. Beset by tensions and ambiguities, missionary work among enslaved Africans situated the missionaries, enslaved Africans, and colonial rulers in a controversial space concerning the interplay between

religion and social change. First, while many prominent Methodist clergy opposed slavery, the missionaries' primary objective among enslaved Africans was to preach the gospel of redemption through Christ. Second, white planters and missionaries were vehemently opposed to the practice of African religious traditions within enslaved African communities. Third, missionaries consistently confronted two major obstacles in their evangelical enterprises: hostility and condemnation from planters and bureaucratic officials and outright rejection from enslaved Africans.

In this article, I explore the evangelical activities and theology of Methodist missionaries in the colonial British West Indies with a view to identifying some inherent tensions in the encounter between gospel and culture as experienced by enslaved Africans. Using primary sources, particularly missionary diaries and records, I maintain that the relationship between Africans and Methodist missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was permeated with ambiguities and moral contradictions that have far-reaching implications for Caribbean theologies of liberation and the progressive evolution of United Methodist theology today. Moreover, despite the conditions of slavery that allowed for the pervasive censorship of African religious and cultural practices, African responses to Methodism as a religious way of life can be gleaned from missionary records, especially when interpreted in the light of other research on the Caribbean religious experience.

Methodist Missionary Responses to African Religious Practices

Like their comrades in other denominations, Methodist missionaries aimed at annihilating African religious and cultural traditions because they were convinced that enslaved Africans were destined for eternal damnation if left alone to perpetuate the "heathen" and "barbaric" practices of their ancestral homelands. Whereas the planters' anti-African values were derived primarily from their economic and political interests in preserving slavery, for the most part, the missionaries were not directly invested in the benefits of the slave regime. Their anti-African values stemmed from an ethnocentric evangelical conviction that Christianity was the true religion, essential for eternal salvation. They viewed African religion and culture as
demonic and aimed at replacing what they perceived to be African polytheism, witchcraft, and fetish practices with initiation by baptism into the Christian faith. In the words of Thomas Coke, "...it is through missionary societies, instrumentally, that true religion has been introduced into the West Indies and been attended with such unexampled success." Coke's introduction to his three-volume *A History of the West Indies... With an Account of the Missions Instituted in Those Islands, From the Commencement of Their Civilization* best reflects the ambiguities and contradictions qualifying the encounter between European missionaries (who tended to oppose slavery and despise African culture) and enslaved Africans (who were forced to come to terms with a gospel that would not accommodate their culture or their sociopolitical aspirations). According to Coke, the promises offered to the believer in the holy scriptures, have rendered even the greatest afflictions tolerable; and enabled the unhappy African, amidst all his distresses, to enjoy the liberty of the sons of God. Through these promises he is enabled to consider his temporal afflictions to be but momentary and transient, and not worthy of being compared with that eternal weight of glory which God has reserved in store for all that love and fear him.

In 1824, Richard Watson expressed similar sentiments when he preached before the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in London regarding *The Religious Instruction of the Slaves in the West Indian Colonies*. In his sermon, Watson puts forward a passionate defense of missionary work among enslaved Africans in the British West Indies. He justifies his defense on the grounds that evangelizing enslaved Africans reduces the chances that they will be socially unruly, disobedient, and insubordinate. Evangelization also attacks African paganism and replaces heathen customs with civilized Christian religious behavior. Watson provides examples such as "Negro funerals," which he calls "a disgusting scene... accompanied with ridiculous gestures, noisy drumming and shouts, with drinking and feasting." Watson repudiates the African practice of visiting grave sites and describes how "a Negro mother in Jamaica was known, for thirteen years, to make this annual visit to the grave of her daughter, and, in an agony of feeling, to offer her oblation." Watson declares, however, "Such is Heathenism!" and laments that unlike a Christian
mother who will think of her deceased children “as in heaven,” the
dead, declares Watson, “knows the result, the
African pagan mother thinks of her deceased children “as in the
grave.” A Christian mother, declares Watson, “knows the result, the
resurrection from the dead; and, urged onward by this hope through
her remaining pilgrimage, she hastens to embrace them again in the
kingdom of God.”

From the island of Tortola, Hodgson also relayed how Methodist
missionary work there was combating many “branches of iniquity to
which enslaved Africans were addicted.” The most egregious
practice was a dance called the “Camson.” According to Hodgson, the
Camson was

3 a filthy, lascivious dance originally imported from Africa, in
which every lustful inclination was indulged to excess. In the
detestable delirium which the passions, when abandoned by all
restraint, occasioned, they pretended to hold an intercourse
with their departed ancestors and relations, and to receive from
them instructions, which they considered themselves
religiously bound to obey. [Hodgson celebrates the fact that]
this diabolical custom is now totally abandoned, through the
preaching of the gospel. Many have exchanged it for the truth
as it is in Jesus and recount with horror the parts they have
borne in these detestable transactions.

4 Coke painstakingly describes the persecution suffered by many
Methodist missionaries in a number of islands that either denied
missionary licenses to preach or indicted and punished them for
inciting Africans to rebel against slavery. For example, in Saint
Vincent Matthew Lamb was beaten and imprisoned for preaching the
gospel to Africans. In Jamaica, local citizens and government officials
harassed Coke, Hammett, and Campbell after repeated attempts to
preach the gospel to Africans. Coke provides detailed accounts of the
physical traumas he and his men endured as they answered the call to
spread the gospel to enslaved Africans. “But what are these
difficulties,” says Coke, “if the Lord strengthen us to go through them,
and if hundreds of the poor Africans get safely to heaven?”

5 The planters carefully monitored missionary activities and insisted
that they preach a Christian doctrine that could in no way be adduced
to endorse the abolitionist political ideology that was circulating
among religious and secular liberal circles in Britain. Indeed, the
Methodist missionaries were emphatically critical of slavery, not solely because they understood it to be unethical but also because—in defense of slavery—the planters exhibited significant control over the missionaries’ activities and often disrupted or sabotaged religious services. Ultimately, the missionaries opposed anything that interfered with their religious duty of saving “heathen” souls.

Because missionaries took extra pains to ensure that their message of spiritual salvation through Christ would not be misinterpreted by enslaved Africans as support for rebellious activities, they taught enslaved Africans that they would receive delayed compensation for the daily suffering they endured in the present life. They accomplished this by propagating ethical teachings from select biblical texts that emphasized spiritual salvation in spite of physical captivity. Moreover, in terms of devotional instruction, the missionaries firmly preached compliance and willing cooperation with the social norms and regulations of the slave system. Social subordination, based on race, had to be reinforced among enslaved Africans. Missionary Christianity—with its attending doctrines of sin, repentance, personal salvation, divine providence, and so forth—functioned ideologically as an important form of social control and cultural hegemony. John Vickers’s analysis of Coke’s response to the Haitian revolution of 1791 makes this clear. Vickers notes that, during his last trip to the West Indies in 1793

Coke heard accounts of the ruthless treatment of Europeans in Haiti by Negro rebels . . . and though he believed this to be a just retribution for the island’s moral degradation, it was also a warning of what could result from the emancipation of slaves who were not in bondage to Christ. Greater as he detested . . . slavery, in the last resort the eternal salvation of the slaves mattered to him more than their temporal emancipation; and he was not prepared to jeopardize the one to effect the other.6

To some, these Methodist missionaries might appear normal or even heroic given their contexts and backgrounds. They underwent tremendous personal hardships in trying to convert Africans to Christianity. African converts also suffered as a result of their affiliation with the Methodists; and Methodist missionary diaries feature reports of their success in convincing Africans to accept the Christian way of life and thus abandon their heathen customs and sinful pastimes. The missionaries especially marvel at the dedication
of enslaved African Christians who often risked punishment in sneaking away from the plantations to attend preaching services. By the eve of Emancipation in 1838 the Methodist missionaries were proud to claim Africans like Cuffey Undey of Grenada, who declared before a group of fellow Christians:

My dear brethren, many people in Africa be dark, same way we been dark before; let us send them the gospel: You can’t go: I can’t go: and if we could go, we couldn’t preach, but we can send. Shall our kindred in Africa perish without the gospel while we hab it in our power to send it to them. We can’t say we not able, we can do it. Before time we been poor slaves; and we work for lashes; now we all be free, and we work for money. De gospel do all dis for we; let us send it to every part of the world! Freely we hab received, let us freely give.?

A Womanist Approach to the Gospel-and-Culture Contradiction

While it is only to be expected that newly emancipated African Caribbean Christians would concern themselves with evangelizing the African continent, the problem of the gospel-and-culture contradiction has never been resolved for Caribbean people. The gospel was preached as consistent with European culture and tolerant of European enslavement of Africans. At the same time, the gospel was preached as antithetical to African culture and efforts by enslaved Africans to resist bondage and social control. Indeed some Africans accepted this outlandish contradiction as the context that would prepare them for eternal salvation. Many of them joined the Methodist church, and their descendants have remained faithful members until today.

It is also important, however, to analyze the missionary records in the context of contemporary research on the broader African Caribbean religious experience. Of all the theological perspectives I have encountered, I find that womanist theology provides the rationale and basis for approaching theology from a starting point that best accounts for the complex interplay between Christianity and African-derived religions in the Caribbean. Womanist theology was the first Black theology to call attention to the "Spirit" and to the unorthodox, popular religiosity—the folkways and folk wisdom—that...
pervade Black Christian-identified women's religious worldviews and have allowed for survival strategies that offer possibilities for enhancing the quality of life in Black communities.

Womanist theology also encourages interdisciplinary methodological approaches to theology that are based upon encounters with ordinary Black women whose religious beliefs and spiritual strivings have been overlooked by Black male theologians in their pioneering works. Through ethnographic research, womanist theologians are discovering that Black Christian women draw insights from a broader religious resource than what is often conceived of as orthodox Christianity. This is especially true of women in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Although womanist theology in general leans heavily toward Christian theological reflection, I maintain that womanist theory, theological categories, and approaches are flexible enough to accommodate a Caribbean theological perspective that intentionally includes African-derived religions and other Black religious traditions as valid sources for theological reflection. Indeed, Delores Williams's examination of the Universal Hagar's Spiritual Church as a source for rethinking ecclesiology is a step in this direction. Moreover, Williams's womanist hermeneutical approach to the Bible compels her to challenge the exclusive privilege Black theologians have been giving to Jewish and Christian sources in their works. Williams concludes that "in order to respond to the tensions in African-American faith and to suggest woman-inclusive correctives [Black theologians] might have to rely upon non-Christian and non-Jewish sources to interpret texts and shape their talk about the community's understanding of how God relates to its life."

There is ample evidence across the Caribbean that Africans resisted Methodist evangelistic efforts and other missionary enterprises because virtually every island has maintained some viable practice of African-derived religion. From a position of theological integrity, Methodists and other Christians cannot approach the issue of Christianity and African-derived religions as a question of "religious pluralism." The issue of how these two religious orientations and traditions will or do cohabit is still closely related to the gospel-and-culture contradiction that was manifested during the period of African enslavement. Moreover, the path that most Caribbean theologians have taken in their efforts to contextualize the gospel or decolonize (Erskine) and indigenize (Williams)' Christianity...
has only reinforced the ambiguities and contradictions regarding the issue of gospel and culture in Caribbean religious experience.

When Black theologians began to write in the late 1960s, they identified the starting point for their liberation theology as the slave period, and their theological reflections have centered Christianity as the dominant religious tradition giving birth to liberative theological ideas in African-American history. Because African North-American religious traditions, which represent a more explicit relationship with the classical cultures of Africa, are thought to be scantily preserved in scattered geographical regions such as Louisiana (Voodoo) and the Sea Islands, they have not been explored as normative sources for Black theological construction. In addition, the chauvinism built into the very definition of theology has impacted the unidimensional emphasis on Christianity as the chief source of liberative traditions in African American religious history.

Influenced by North American Black liberation theology, Caribbean theology has embarked upon the same methodological course of arguing for the liberative potential in Caribbean Christian traditions while ignoring the liberation motif of the African religious traditions in Caribbean history and culture. Moreover, this approach has developed in the face of overwhelming historical evidence that, prior to any intensive introduction to the Christian faith, enslaved Africans across the Americas and the Caribbean constantly reasserted the moral imperatives of their inherited African religious traditions through sociopolitical acts of resistance against slavery and White supremacy.

Indeed, I would argue that ultimately Methodist missionary records provide evidence that some Africans even resisted missionary Christianity by appropriating its biblical symbols and religious traditions in order to maintain African religious practices. In such cases, the missionaries saw themselves as spreading the “gospel” and obliterating African culture when, in fact, Africans were preserving their culture and marginalizing the “gospel.” The island of Jamaica is an important context for exploring this pattern of resistance in the African Carribean religious experience.

**African Jamaican Responses to Methodist Missionaries**

As I assess the missionary documents alongside my fieldwork in Jamaica, there appear to be two striking examples worth noting. First,
the Methodist missionaries make constant references to the "bands" that Africans were forming during the height of their activities in the Caribbean. Band meetings were originally instituted in the Methodist movement in England in 1739. Bands were "companies of converted men, set to watch over and help each other." Although the bands were replaced by "classes" and "holiness" meetings in some Methodist communities, John Wesley noted their essential role in the preservation of Methodist faith and practice. According to Wesley, "where there is no band-meeting there is no Methodism." Coke reports that on one occasion 300 Africans were meeting in a band in Kingston, Jamaica. It is no coincidence that practitioners of African-derived religions in Jamaica (namely, Kumina and Revival/Zion) organize themselves into groups that they call "bands." And Kumina bands do exactly what the missionaries repudiated. Their band meetings are not devoted to prayer and the reinforcement of Methodist piety, as the missionaries would have insisted. These meetings are devoted to African ceremonies that are designed to permit intercourse between the members of the bands and the ancestors who inhabit the invisible spirit-world domain. Revival/Zionists, too, hold their band meetings to have free intercourse with the Spirit Messengers, whom they revere alongside the Christian Trinity and the ancestors.

The other example of African resistance pertains to the biblical symbol of Zion. Methodist missionary documents also make constant references to Zion. For example, in volume 3 of his History of the West Indies Coke notes how the Moravian missionaries "awakened" "a great many" enslaved Africans "and taught [them] to seek after the living God; so that the number of those who have inquired the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, has been greatly increased." Later in the same text, Coke celebrates how "through the instrumentality of our missionaries," enslaved Africans on the island of Nevis "had been brought from their native darkness to an acquaintance with the gospel; and instead of seeking death in the error of their ways, they were inquiring their way to Zion. . . ." A fellow missionary in Nevis, John Brownell, agreed with Coke and testified that "from regions which were wrapped up in darkness, the praises of Mount Zion have resounded; and those tongues which had never pronounced the name Jehovah, have learned to bless the God of their salvation." Other documents make reference to Zion in hymns as a synonym for heaven. Whether this emphasis is exclusively Methodist is unclear. However, I
have not come across such references in Moravian, Baptist, and Presbyterian missionary records. What cannot be overlooked is the unique way in which the Jamaican Revival/Zion tradition (which most scholars classify as an Afro-Christian religion) has reconceived the icon of Zion to signify a generic homeland in Africa and a religious life with a distinct African ethos and aesthetic. Although I interpret the religious practices of the Revival/Zionists as African-derived rather than Afro-Christian, the point to be made is that the Methodist missionaries—who were constantly associating African converts with their concepts of Zion—would have found offensive and would have totally rejected as "heathenism" both the Revival/Zionist expression of faith and spirituality as well as their identification with the biblical icon. This pattern of asserting agency by appropriating and reconceiving Christian sources is even more concretely evident in the Rastafari tradition, where the symbol of Zion is often invoked with reference to a specific region in Africa—Ethiopia—and a Pan-African orientation to social, cultural, and political life.

In both examples, the Revival/Zion, Kumina, and Rastafari traditions demonstrate that Africans were agents in shaping African-derived or African-inspired institutions in spite of missionary efforts to eradicate their cultures and promote the "gospel." It is especially noteworthy for theological reflection that Africans in Jamaica managed to renegotiate for their own purposes what I will call a protected and legitimate space—band meetings—which required member allegiance to the orthodox teachings and practices of the Methodist faith. Members of the Kumina and Revival/Zion traditions utilized band meetings for a different kind of orthodoxy, which allowed participants to demonstrate their allegiance to African spirituality and religious traditions. They engaged Christian resources in order to configure spaces and symbols that would keep them oriented toward Africa in hostile anti-African and Afro-phobic slaveholding and colonial societies. Most important, African reinterpretations of Christian ideas and institutions are not indicative of cultural difference. When considered in the context of missionary protests against African culture and religion, these reinterpretations are African attempts to negotiate religious and cultural dissonance from a disadvantaged position. Thus, I maintain that Africans, external to the missionary church, have been responsible for generating the most uncompromising, critical responses to the missionary pro-Jesus,
anti-African “gospel.” It follows, then, that any critical, constructive theological reflection on Methodist theology and identity in the Caribbean context must revisit the historical encounter between Methodist missionaries and enslaved Africans, focusing on the activities of the African-oriented religious traditions.

Caribbean theologians have written extensively about the destructive impact of missionary Christianity on the formation of Black Christian identity in the region. Jamaican theologian Lewin Williams’s analysis of the colonial missionary church is one case in point. He understands the colonial missionary church as one that engaged in “misevangelization” and declares that it is “as alive today as when the conquistadores arrived with the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other...” While I agree with the tenor of Williams’s critique, I want to add that evangelism as a Christian obligation has always involved personal faith convictions about Jesus Christ’s relevance for all people, which includes, in the worst cases, hegemonic and, in the best cases, covert strategies for winning converts. Moreover, it is impossible to compare the inclusive communotheism of the Revival/Zionists and Kuminaists with the professed monotheism of Christians and not raise challenging questions about evangelization as a Christian responsibility. In the end, I find unacceptable the reluctance on the part of Caribbean theologians to critique missionary Christianity from the scrutinizing perspectives of the African-derived or African-inspired religious communities that have shaped their identities in the shadow of hegemonic Christian institutions since the period of African enslavement. This traceable tradition of resistance, it appears to me, must be a starting point for critical Caribbean theological reflection that attempts to overcome the gospel-and-culture contradiction still facing Black Christians in the Methodist traditions, as well as others.

Rethinking Gospel and Culture: The Zion of Rastafari

The most accountable position that theologians, Methodist churches, and other denominations in the Caribbean can take to address the gospel-and-culture problem is a willingness and commitment to hear from and be challenged by African-oriented religious traditions in the region. By examining the visions of liberation, critiques of the Euro-missionary enterprise, and even the internal critiques on the part...
of these religious traditions, theologians and the larger Christian community may obtain clearer insight into the problem of evangelization for Caribbeans of African descent. In the context of Jamaica, for example, the Rastafari have struggled to come to terms with the inadequacies of both Euro-missionary Christianity and African-derived religions (Kumina, Revival/Zion) since the 1930s.

Rastafari religiosity, despite its appropriation of the Bible as a primary source for theological construction, came into existence in Jamaica to dispute the classic claims of Euro-missionary Christianity and to invalidate the pseudo-connections between African spirituality and the Euro-Christian faith that African Jamaicans had begun to make after experiencing sustained encounters with Euro-Christian missionaries. To be sure, Rastafari emerged as a bifocally (externally and internally) critical religio-cultural tradition in that it viewed Christianity with a hermeneutics of suspicion, identifying it as intrinsically Eurocentric and anti-African in doctrine and piety. Rastas have also employed a hermeneutics of suspicion to interpret and discredit the African Jamaican acceptance of (Euro-) Christianity as expressed by increasing numbers of Africans, especially since the mid-nineteenth century. Rastology exposes African-Jamaican Christian identity as an oxymoron that promotes African enslavement, impotence, and anomie.

More important, Rastafari arose in Jamaica as an Afro-centric Iconic tradition that critically evaluated the characteristics and practices of Revival/Zion religion, embracing and expanding upon some while rejecting others. The most obvious example is the retention of the symbol of Zion.

Within the Revival/Zion tradition, Africans appropriated the Old Testament biblical symbol and conceived of Zion in terms of their thirst for freedom. Zion came to represent an "other" space, both geographic and existential, where Africans were assured freedom, dignity, the conditions for authentic self-repossession, and the eradication of European colonial authority. Revival/Zionists assert that Zion, the place of freedom, is in Africa; and Rastas passionately concur. Yet, as mentioned above, while affirming the religious significance of Zion for Africans, Rastology crystalized more than anything around a different symbol—a specific political and historical symbol of contemporary relevance that was and continues to be Ethiopia, or Abyssinia. Rastafari’s Ethiopianist Pan-Africanism (Ethiopianism) was apparently inspired by the Bible, where among
numerous references to Ethiopia is the prophetic utterance to “let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God” (Psalm 68:31). Ethiopia as Zion was also embraced because, by the 1930s, when Rastafari was born, Ethiopia had emerged as the only African country able to resist European colonialism (in spite of Italian invasions and temporary occupations). The political status of Ethiopia in the 1930s as a sovereign kingdom only reinforced what Rastas understood as God’s providential will for Africans.

If one is to properly assess its critical contribution to African people’s unceasing struggle for liberation and autonomy in the island, the Ethiopianism of Rastafari must be examined as an integral component of the evolution of African religiosity and spirituality in Jamaica. By the late-nineteenth century, when Revival/Zion was spreading its wings as a novel manifestation of African spirituality, African Jamaican cultural connections to the African continent were dissolving under the anti-African influence of Euro-missionary Christianity. What remained was naturally diluted by generational distance from Africa; loss of contact with Africa; and the disintegration of actual memories of Africa, as formerly enslaved African-born Jamaicans aged and passed on. Jamaican-born Revival/Zionists, then, appropriated Zion as a substitute for specific peoples, cultures, civilizations, and regions on the African continent that often gave their African-born ancestors the courage to struggle to free themselves from dehumanizing relationships and social arrangement.

Revival/Zionists developed spiritual hymns celebrating Zion and its promise of freedom and abundant life for Africans. As they sang “don’t trouble Zion,” Rastas heard their cry and related the symbol of Zion to their Ethiopianism, bringing precise definition and geographic specificity to the African Jamaican desire for freedom and autonomy. Rastas related their liberation struggle to a specific place in Africa: a country and a kingdom with a history of political sovereignty that African Jamaicans yearned for and viewed as the solution to their condition of captivity and misery. Moreover, Rastas embraced the view that repatriation to the continent of Africa was essential for authentic liberation. In post-emancipation Jamaica, Rastafari came to assert that the African quest for freedom and political sovereignty must be expressed not only by references to symbolic biblical icons but also through specific concepts and icons that have temporal
historical significance and can thus offer Africans opportunities to pursue liberation in pre-death lived experience.

Most important, Rastafari established the urgency of African peoples' struggle for liberation by constantly articulating a temporal vision of liberation in human history over and against Euro-missionary theology that promoted temporal historical suffering for Africans and subsequent eschatological relief. The Rastafari vision of temporal historical liberation also functioned as a critical protest against post-death symbolic visions of liberation often expressed by Revival/Zionists. Thus Rastas could embrace Zion as a place of freedom, but they went beyond Revival/Zionists to define freedom in non-eschatological terms as an historical ambition. Rastas were intent on specifying that religious talk about freedom was meaningful only with reference to pre-death life experience. Committed to the religious imperatives of generations of freedom-seeking Africans, Rastas could audaciously modify a biblical psalm (137) about Zion and sing it with their hearts and minds focused upon their Zion—Ethiopia:

By the Rivers of Babylon, there we sat down
And there we wept, when we remembered Zion.
For the wicked carried us away in captivity
Required from us a song,
But how can we sing King Alphath's song
In a strange land.

The prophetic theological import of Rastafari as a critical reflection upon the legacy of African religious experience in Jamaica cannot be ignored when considering the gospel-and-culture contradiction. The Zion that the Rastafari invoke represents that goal of concrete temporal liberation from the trappings of Eurocentric religion and culture, and from European and North American politics of domination. It is left for Caribbean theologians, as well as Methodist churches (given their history of missions in the region), to recognize this and consider the hermeneutical implications of Rastology, Revival/Zion, Kumina, and other African religious traditions in the Caribbean for liberative theological construction. The implications, as I see them, will compel the church to raise serious questions about the compatibility between reigning expressions of Christianity and the approximation of authentic liberation for the people of African heritage in the Caribbean.
Notes

2. Ibid., 27.
5. Ibid., 286.
11. Ibid., 88.
13. Kumina and Revival/Zion practitioners use the same term, *bands*, for both the singular and plural forms.
15. Ibid., 35.
17. Communotheism is a term coined by Okechukwu Ogbonnaya to describe African theism. He rejects terms like *diffused monotheism* and *polytheism* as invalid for describing African theism and argues that Africans have traditionally conceived of the divine as a community. See A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity* (New York: Paragon House, 1994).
21. Abyssinia is the ancient name for the kingdom that became known as Ethiopia in the modern period.
Tumani Mutasa Nyajeka

African Women and Education: Vision, Myth, and Reality

An article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, dated 7 September 1999, reads:

Zimbabwe, which seemed on the verge of a breakthrough on rights of women just 15 years ago, was set back by an April unanimous decision of its Supreme Court that adult females are inherently inferior to males and have a status akin to that of a teenager. The court cited "the nature of African society" as its basis.

The United Methodist Church chose Zimbabwe as the venue for founding its historic institution of higher education on the African continent. In 1992 Africa University opened its doors for the first time in Old Mutare. Within less than a decade of its founding, Africa University's female enrollment has risen to nearly 45 percent. This leads one to the question: Is education the answer in the twenty-first century to the bleak condition of powerlessness of African women—and particularly of Zimbabwean women? If the answer is yes, then how does one reconcile this with the Zimbabwe Supreme Court's recent categorical pronouncement about the "inherent

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inferiority of women," especially given the fact that some of the most educated and brilliant of the country's minds deliberated the issue? In addressing these questions in this article I argue that the commitment of The United Methodist Church to the transformation of the existential condition of African women through education has come to constitute a prophetic vision. I show that some of the causes of the dismal situation of the African woman lie deep in the history of the continent and its peoples.

The Prophetic Church

The United Methodist Church's mission to Zimbabwean women during difficult times like these is part of a deliberate pattern of ministry to the world's women in the new century. And nowhere is the need for such a ministry greater than on the African continent. The article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution quoted above is a clarion call to the world that women are under siege.

Within the past decade, The United Methodist Church has boldly launched funding programs consisting of scholarships, fellowships, and loans for women of color in higher education in the United States and abroad. This places the church's efforts far ahead of other public and private agencies that are just beginning to be informed of the role of education in addressing the African woman's crisis. For example, the 1998 National Summit on Africa study document in education and culture concludes that it is through funding in education and other material support that the struggle for African women's rights will be maintained. The study calls for churches, professional bodies, social organizations, and local non-governmental organizations to engage in the battle for affirmative-action policies for girls and women in African countries today. On the state of African women and education the document states:

In many parts of Africa, girls comprise a smaller percentage of the children in primary school than boys—and even less at the secondary level, where girls form about 30 percent of the total. At the tertiary level the situation worsens, with female students at only 25 percent of those enrolled. Yet it is well known that the education of girls and women has a positive impact on the economic and social well-being of the family and of society as
The economic levels of educated women are usually higher than those of their less-educated sisters. More highly educated women are more likely to participate actively in political decision-making. Most important of all, education, in particular primary and secondary education, is a basic human right, and it is constantly and persistently transgressed in many African countries because of financial constraints on the part of governments and parents. Women generally have more limited opportunities for tertiary education than men in Africa. A concerted effort to address this issue would include programs aimed at expanding women's opportunities for tertiary education in key areas such as science and technology; additional facilities dedicated to women such as women's programs, women's hostels, women's colleges; and the exploration of distance education, special scholarships, and other programs that will enable young married women and young mothers to further their education.

The historic engagement of The United Methodist Church in seeking to liberate African women for the twenty-first century through a ministry of education is thus an expression of the church's prophetic tradition. Having identified the current crisis in the condition of African women, the church, together with African women, has committed itself to a prophetic vision of a world in which women and men can live together as equals in communion with God. The church has made the choice to walk this historic path to freedom together with African women. With the support of the church of Christ, African women have never given up fighting for freedom in their lifetime. A church that says no to misery and suffering, denounces unjust orders, and announces a more just world to be built by the oppressed in history is a prophetic church. This is a church in and not outside history. In historical conflicts and contradictions, the church's act of speaking out or keeping silence, its activity or inactivity, is a form of taking sides in the making of history.

Since a prophetic church is deeply involved in the historical-social praxis of the oppressed, to get a better understanding of the church's prophetic role it is mandatory that one obtain a critical reading of the history of conflict. That is, if the church is to remain faithful to its prophetic vision of a ministry dedicated to freeing African women, it is imperative that research and study on the history of the pain and
suffering of the African woman be undertaken. Historical studies on the current crisis and condition of the African woman have hardly begun. Those that exist have historically been conducted by Western scholars, with the West as the intended audience. However, there are now available a few studies by African women. The church's solidarity with African women in education is a walk through not only the history of African women but also that of the church. In this article I argue that a historical study of the experience of Zimbabwean women within the past hundred years will equip the church with resources and strategies for a transformative ministry in our new century.

Zimbabwe: History and Women's Reality

Studies show that African women's access to education, even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, is still profoundly bleak. These studies acknowledge that the causes for this situation lie deep in the history of the African continent and its peoples. Africa possesses a rich cultural heritage, and its peoples have contributed to world civilization from the very beginning of humankind. But 400 years of European imperialism stole its people and its land and ravaged its environment. Until the 1960s, and even as late as the 1980s and 1990s, some Africans still languished under European political systems of slavery, colonialism, and colonization. Zimbabwe, for example, received its political independence only in 1980.

Given these historical conditions, African women and men had limited or no access to education. Nearly every colonial government viewed education in the hands of African women and men as a dangerous tool. To meet the needs of the local colonial administrators, colonial systems of education limited the amount, content, and quality of education that the local population was able to obtain. For example, at the time of independence (1980), Zimbabwe (which was better off than many other African countries) had just 35 percent of its children in primary school and only 2 percent at secondary school. Under the system of formal education in the 20 years preceding independence, a mere 40,000 people (out of a population of over 7 million) had been allowed to attain three years of high-school education. Less than 1 percent could gain access to tertiary education.2
Church, State, and Education

In colonial Zimbabwe the government dictated the policies, the curriculum design and development, as well as the general goals, of formal education. Therefore, when it entered the arena of African education, the mission church of the colonial era was required by law to adopt and implement government educational policies. When it came to “Native Affairs,” the colonial government often made it clear to the church that the government wielded exclusive power to dictate the law of the land. And when it came to education, an unwritten law dictated that early-childhood education was to be almost exclusively male.

Why a male-only education? To say that the policy in Africa to promote a male-only education is the result of European Victorian culture’s denying women access to education is inadequate. Nor does the explanation that initially the colonial labor market exclusively required male labor tell the whole story. A fundamental reason for male-only education had to do with the colonial European’s fear of the African woman’s power and authority in traditional societies. During the colonization of the continent, Europeans discovered that in most African societies women wielded such power that their men viewed them as a frustrating impediment to power, land, and wealth. In order to secure ultimate power and control after military conquests, the colonial establishment sought to neutralize the power of women. First, the colonial powers spawned myths and literature arguing that African women had no history; at the same time, they demonized the nature and power of African women in their societies. Second, the colonists used these myths to deny human rights, access to education, and resources to African women.

When mission and government schools opened in Zimbabwe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, admission was exclusively male. Up to the time of political independence, access to education remained an elusive dream for the majority of female children in southern Africa. As late as 1955, many girls in this region were able to gain entrance into a mission school only because of the power of a myth making the rounds that was known to melt many a missionary’s heart. According to this myth, a young girl is desperate to be admitted to a mission school because, as she tearfully explains, she is fleeing from a traditionally arranged marriage to a seventy-year-old man. For example, pleading with Dr. Mabel Palmer in 1949 for an opportunity
to further her education and flee from her village in Umtata, Transkei, Lilly Moya used this myth to good effect:

The climax if not reached, was about to be reached. Besides all the other reasons I once gave you before, all along our long correspondence, I had never told you this and now I feel compelled to tell you that I could, or in fact (would) try to endure every difficulty patiently and humbly, but not to see myself getting married in an awkward manner to a man I hated so much. That is one of the things I so much hate being married. I don’t even dream about it. That awful bondage. That is what my uncle did to me.4

When the government opened its first secondary school at Goromonzi, Zimbabwe in 1946, its total enrolment was 50 boys (no girls). In A Non-Racial Island of Learning Gelfand mentions an incident that took place at the opening of the University College of Rhodesia, a debacle that came to be known as the “Chavhunduka Affair.” When the University College opened its first session in March 1957, it had a multiracial student body of 68 full-time students. Of these eight were Africans; and of the African students only one was female, a young woman named Sarah Chavhunduka. The University College had no residential facility for African women, and as a last resort Sarah was assigned an apartment in the African men’s residential hall. When she protested this arrangement, the university agreed to resolve the awkward situation. After lengthy negotiations Chavhunduka was moved to the basement of the white women’s residential hall, with the condition that she use a separate bathroom and corridor. This arrangement met with public protest from white parents, who threatened to withdraw their daughters from the University.5

On Mythmaking
Motivated by racism, classism, and sexism, colonial society in Africa spawned a series of myths depicting African women as social outcasts who as human beings were biologically inferior. Unexposed and unchallenged, such myths have persisted in the postcolonial political and religious African-male-dominated cultures. British colonization of Zimbabwe was a multilayered expedition of subjugation. Through military violence the British achieved complete
subordination of black men, women, and the environment. The process of the subjugation of African women and the environment is rarely the subject of historical studies. Even after Zimbabwe's independence, African women still suffer from a stupor induced by colonial violence, which leaves them and the environment voiceless. As African men in the postcolonial church and society hold power and positions once occupied by white men, women and the environment exist in a liminal space of silence. A reading of colonial sources shows that the current crisis of female subordination in Zimbabwe is both a historical event and a social process.

Enter the British

When British colonists entered the territory of Zimbabwe in the nineteenth century to explore, they seemed aware of the fact that in both matrilineal and patrilineal traditional societies of Zimbabwe women wielded power and authority in politics and religion. These colonists also apparently didn’t hesitate to spawn mythical literature about the wickedness of “native” women and the savagery of their natural environment. This literature generally depicted African women as unfeminine, sinister creatures unfit to live. The literature justified the use of violence as a means to silence these women or to physically “relieve” them of their wicked misery. The literature further portrayed nature as savage, to be tamed and subordinated.

A text that powerfully captures this process of colonial mythmaking about African women and nature is the classic novel by H. Rider Haggard titled *King Solomon's Mines*. The book is based on Haggard’s expedition in the nineteenth century into what is now Zimbabwe. In the first chapter of the book Haggard outlines the reasons for writing the book. Here are the fourth and the last of his reasons:

[I] am going to tell the strangest story that I know of. It may seem a queer thing to say, especially considering that there is no woman in it—except Foulata. Stop, though! there is Gagaoola, if she was a woman and not a fiend. But she was a hundred at least, and therefore not marriageable, so don't count her. At any rate, I can safely say that there is not a petticoat in the whole history.
Well, I had better come to the yoke. It is a stiff place, and I feel as though I were bogged up to the axle...
An analysis of these two female characters in the text reveals their resemblance to the African woman of the colonial myth. Moreover, Haggard depicts elephants as savage brutes. Listen to this description of an elephant hunt:

The three shots took effect, and down he went, dead. Again the herd started, but unfortunately for them about a hundred yards further on was a nullah, or dried water track, with steep banks, a place very much resembling the one where the Prince Imperial was killed in Zululand. Into this the elephants plunged, and when we reached the edge we found them struggling in wild confusion to get up the other bank, filling the air with their screams, and trumpeting as they pushed one another aside in their selfish panic, just like so many human beings. Now was our opportunity, and firing away as quick as we could load, we killed five of the poor beasts, and no doubt should have bagged the whole herd, had they not suddenly given up their attempts to climb the bank and rushed headlong down the nullah. We were too tired to follow them, and perhaps also a little sick of slaughter, eight elephants being a pretty good bag for one day.

So after we were rested a little and the Kafirs had cut out the hearts of two of the dead elephants for supper, we started homewards, very well pleased with ourselves, having made up our minds to send the bearers on the morrow to chop away the tusks.8

The character in the novel called Gagool is the ageless woman whose voice and authority to make decisions was, as the white men found out, the last word in all of Kukuanaland. Gagool symbolized the history and traditions of Kukuanaland. Apart from being the medium between the people and the “Silent Ones,” Gagool was also the only person who knew the secret path to the national treasure. Twala, the Kukuana king, carried out policies and political decisions only after consulting with Gagool. In the white man’s eyes Gagool was a symbol of evil. Upon encounter with Gagool, Quatermain writes:

[I] so observed the wizened monkey-like figure creeping from the shadow of the hut. It crept on all fours, but when it reached the place where the king sat it rose upon its feet, and
throwing the furry covering from its face, revealed a most extraordinary and weird countenance. Apparently it was that of a woman of great age, so shrunken that in size it seemed little larger than the face of a year-old child, although made up of a number of deep and yellow wrinkles. Set in these wrinkles was a sunken slit, that represented the mouth, beneath which the chin curved outwards to a point. There was no nose to speak of; indeed, the visage might have been taken for that of a sun-dried corpse had it not been for a pair of large black eyes, still full of fire and intelligence, which gleamed and played under the snow-white eyebrows, and the projecting parchment-coloured skull, like jewels in a charnel-house. As for the head itself, it was perfectly bare, and yellow in hue. . . . The figure to whom this fearful countenance belonged, a countenance so fearful, indeed that it caused a shiver of fear to pass through us as we gazed on it, stood still for a moment. Then suddenly it projected a skinny claw armed with nails nearly an inch long, and laying it on the shoulder of Twala the king, began to speak in a thin and piercing voice. . . .

Endless adjectives and phrases are summoned to convey Gagool's ugliness. For example, she has a bald, vulture-like head and a frightful, old body, bent nearly double with extreme age; she is an old fiend, an animated crooked stick; she has horrid eyes, gleaming and glowing with most unholy luster.

The name Gagool, given to this wise woman leader by the three British men, is meant to convey a message. The root verb Gag leaves the reader with little doubt about the eventual fate of such a character in the unfolding drama of the novel: this African woman was to be silenced. And in this text she is indeed silenced.

In demonizing the power and authority of the African woman, imperial Europe created the myth of the African woman's physical strength. And the European colonial powers used this myth as a weapon to silence African women in the interest of justifying European economic exploitation of the continent's women. In southern Africa—be it on the arid, hot, impoverished reservations of Namibia or in Zimbabwe or in apartheid South Africa—she would toil alone endlessly. In the Americas she would toil in the heat of a harsh sun on the cotton and sugar plantations.

The other woman mentioned in Haggard's novel is Foulata, the fair
virgin whom the party rescued from the sacrificial gallows. King Twala offered the party the option to choose wives from among the fairest virgins. Captain Good was ready to accept the king’s offer; however, his plans were thwarted by Quatermain, who explains that he being elderly and wise, and foreseeing the endless complications that anything of the sort would involve, for women bring trouble as surely as the night follows the day, . . . put in a hasty answer: “Thanks to thee, O King, but we white men wed only with white women like ourselves. Your maidens are fair, but they are not for us!”

Kukuana custom was to sacrifice the virgin with the fairest complexion (light skin was not a positive attribute in traditional Shona images of beauty). On this day Twala chose to sacrifice a young woman—Foulata—whom all three of the British men had agreed was beautiful and full of grace, charm, and skill. After pleading in vain for her life, Foulata turned to the white men for help. Relying heavily on their firepower, the three white men devised a plan to rescue Foulata from the sacrificial spear. With a sudden movement, the girl flung herself before Captain Good:

“Oh, white father from the Stars!” she cried, “throw over me the mantle of protection; let me creep into the shadow of thy strength, that I may be saved. Oh, keep me from these cruel men and from the mercies of Gagool!”

“All right, my hearty, I’ll look after you,” sang out Good, in nervous Saxon.

“Come, get up, there’s a good girl,” and he stooped and caught her hand.

Clearly Foulata is the African woman running away from real or imagined cultural evil. And in the colonial setting of the novel, she would land in the white man’s arms, seeking protection and refuge. The three British men are happy to protect and stay with this young, beautiful, and talented African woman. But the elder among them, Quatermain, again makes it very clear that their relationship with her is to remain platonic because they are white and she is black.

Foulata’s name leaves very little to the imagination as to the message behind its meaning. With the verb root foul, it certainly
suggests that even this other African woman—despite her appearance and skill—is filthy and undesirable; that is, she is black. Foulata and the white men make a commitment to care for one another, but on the condition of an asexual relationship. Together they journeyed into the intricate maze of the sacred cave in search of the Kukuana Treasury Trove. Fifteen paces away from finding the goatskin full of diamonds, Foulata sits down to recover from complete exhaustion, a basket of provisions by her side. It was here that she meets her death from Gagool's fatal attack. She died in Good's arms, declaring her love for him:

Say to my lord, Bougwan, that—I love him, and that I am glad to die because I know he cannot cumber his life with such as I am, for the sun may not mate with darkness, nor the white with the black.

Say that, since I saw him, at times I have felt as though there were a bird in my bosom, which would one day fly hence and sing elsewhere. Even now, though I cannot lift my hand, and my brain grows cold, I do not feel as though my heart were dying; it is so full of love that it could live ten thousand years, and yet be young.12

In their strategy to access the hidden treasure (diamonds) of King Solomon's Mines, believed to have been located at the Great Zimbabwe Shrine, the three British men managed to conspire and stage a military coup. They overthrew the king and installed their Kukuana friend, Ignosi. At the occasion of his coronation ceremony Ignosi conferred royal status on the British. Their account on that day reads:

An order was also promulgated throughout the length and breadth of Kukuanaland, that whilst we honoured the country with our presence we three were to be greeted with the royal salute, and to be treated with the same ceremony and respect that was by custom accorded to the king. Also the power of life and death was publicly conferred upon us.13

After the coronation ceremony the new king Ignosi kept his promise to the white men to force Gagool to escort them to the sacred site, the resting place of the ancestors (the Silent Ones), where the
Kukuana chamber of treasure was hidden. On the way out of the secret chamber, Gagool is crushed to death. African woman power was finally defeated.

The Prophetic Church

Liberation theologians such as James Cone and Paulo Freire assert that a prophetic church seeking the genuine transformation of a society conducts a serious study of an oppressed community’s historical experience. Freire postulates that historically there have been three types of churches. The first is the traditionalist church, whose worldview is basically imperialist and colonialist. The second type is the modernizing church, whose worldview is institutional and bureaucratic. Third, there is the prophetic church, whose worldview has historically been to seek a more just world. A study of attitudes toward the plight of African women in the twentieth century shows that sadly the church’s attitudes by and large mirrored colonial cultural attitudes.

To be sure, there has always existed a prophetic church in colonial Zimbabwe. This prophetic impulse was evident in the church of Arthur Shearly Cripps and John White in the 1920s, of Lydia Chimomyo in the 1940s, and of Bishop Abel Muzorewa in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, even this prophetic-church tradition failed dismally when it came to adequately addressing the situation of African women—a situation of suffering and subordination.

When The Methodist Episcopal Church opened its first mission with an industrial arts and Bible school at Old Mutare, Zimbabwe, in 1890, the school was, like those of the government, for boys only. In other words, the church exemplified Freire’s traditionalist-church type: it by and large chose to comply with the colonial establishment and in the end would be used to entrench the brutal system.

Womanist and feminist theologians have argued that the traditionalist church of the colonial period was imperialist, racist, and sexist. In doing womanist theology, Jacquelyn Grant points to the profound similarities in the historical crisis facing the two sisters, African and African American. She explains:

A Black American woman’s reality is . . . complicated.
Certainly women of the dominant society can afford to combat
sexism and sexism alone, but Black women and other Third
World women have more complicated experiences that cannot
be described only in terms of sexism. Their experiences must
be at least tri-dimensional for their realities are impacted by
racism, sexism and classism, and other forms of oppression, all
of which must be addressed. Consequently, in light of this
complicated existence, the Black woman’s experience can
more adequately be described as “being under the underside of
history.”

Feminist theologians underscore the fact that the Euro-American
church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries generally viewed
women as inherently inferior to men. Citing nineteenth-century
feminist protest against the traditional church’s views on women and
redemption, Rosemary Radford Ruether writes:

Redemption for these nineteenth-century American
feminists meant not only the restoration of women to
interpersonal equality with men but also the transformation of
social and legal systems that have denied women’s rights,
perpetuated slavery, and waged war. Redemption is realized,
not primarily in an other worldly escape from the body and the
finite world, but by transforming the world and society into
personal and social relations of justice and peace between
humans. This is the true message of Christ and the gospel. The
churches have betrayed Christ by preaching a theology of
female silencing and subordination.

Similarly, traditionalist mission churches in nineteenth- and
twentieth-century southern Africa have perpetuated hierarchical
beliefs and practices along the lines of race, gender, and class. The
church was quick to adopt colonial myths that portrayed the nature of
African women as inherently evil. In the colonial church and society
African women like Gagool were regarded as a group to be silenced.
When they finally found their way to mission stations, a majority of
Zimbabwean women received a Christian education but were treated
as “third-class citizens.” Everything they brought to the mission or the
church—their race, gender, class, and culture—was rejected as
virtually unredeemable. Historically, African women resisted this
inferior status by founding what African women theologians have
called "churches within the church"—women's church organizations. However, with no access to resources and gender-based solidarity, even these women's organizations barely liberated women from lives of abuse, exploitation, and deprivation. Oftentimes these church women fell victim to a racist, classist, and sexist theology that presented the church as a place of escape from the traumas and trials of colonial and postcolonial society. African women were expected to renounce their will to seek to alleviate their miserable reality through a quest for worldly peace and happiness in this world. Instead, the church taught them to accept their lot in life in favor of working for a paradise in the hereafter. Such a church not only seeks to protect the status quo; it also is a cave into which African women (just like Foulata) are led to their death.

Is Education a Panacea?

Historically the few African women who, like Foulata, gained limited access and space to the mission church and colonial society encountered a plethora of contradictions and conflicts which they never seemed to able to resolve. They discovered that promises of freedom and protection were never guaranteed. In most cases churches and also state legislation enacted with regard to women's issues sought to deprive women—regardless of their education—of any human rights or privileges.

Having severed their primary links with the traditional worldview, most educated African women occupy a liminal space in modern society, in which they are vulnerable to gender-based abuse. On the other hand, they are subject to cultural ridicule in traditional settings. Being neither white nor male, African women are never wanted in the colonial and postcolonial church and society.

Besides being handicapped by the church and the legal system of the state, educated African women are victims of an educational curriculum historically designed to perpetuate racism, classism, and sexism. It is a curriculum that teaches the African woman to despise everything she is. Like Foulata, at the end of the educational process under such a curriculum, the African woman more often than not loathes herself and is unable to save herself or others.

Predicated upon the myth of rugged individualism and material success, these curricula graduate African women who, like their male
counterparts, are rich in material success, but bankrupt in spiritual and moral depth. They are happy and eager as individuals to move into the privileged positions historically occupied by middle- and upper-class white women. Most, like Foulata, are happy to be left by men to sit at the mouth of the cave minding the provisions until they come back. Even when women intellectuals and activists organize and launch protests against dehumanizing legislation and cruel treatment of women, such endeavors are often compromised by the fact that these women belong to the very communities of class oppression, both local and global, that they protest.

Educated African women also face a tragic contradiction: in their zeal to seek equality with their educated male counterparts, they often blindly adopt traditional white or male professional styles and attitudes toward people and the environment. For example, in the name of seeking efficiency and excellence, these women often justify attitudes of arrogance and intolerance as a necessary evil. In the face of such contradictions solidarity with their sisters beyond distinctions of class and professionalism becomes an elusive dream. It is not unusual for these African women—like Gagool and Foulata, who mistake each other for enemies—to vie with one another to the point of seeking to kill one another. Meanwhile the architects of racism and sexism watch gleefully.

Such a situation serves only to legitimize and perpetuate sexist and racist power and authority. It leads to the sort of unbridled individualism in a classist society that extinguishes the spirit of solidarity among women across the social spectrum.

Conclusion

There have always been voices among educated African women that represented the prophetic-church tradition. These voices have been steeped in the historical African woman’s quest for freedom and justice. Take, for example, a woman like Sojourner Truth—an African woman in America who refused to claim freedom until every African woman, man, and child was free from slavery. Or consider Nzinga, the queen who illustrated the genius of the African woman by applying political diplomacy in the potentially explosive situation of a ruthless Portuguese military siege of her territory. Or take Nehanda Nyakasikana of Zimbabwe, who gave up her life on the British
gallows so that freedom could come to her people. It is with African women of such character that the church can face the challenges of the twenty-first century on the African continent.

In its programs on African women and higher education, The United Methodist Church is boldly applying the prophetic-church tradition in the twenty-first century. The denomination's solidarity with African women in education has incarnated a social praxis that goes beyond the selective education of a few individuals to efforts that involve numbers of women committed to challenging repressive structures locally and globally. Being involved in a process that seeks to pull African women out of the culture of silence through education reveals a church that chooses to walk with these women on a historic path—a path to freedom, liberation, and salvation. This is indeed a prophetic church in action.

In their journey toward liberation African women need support in their initiatives to explore their own history. Contrary to the colonial account of history, southern African women continue to discover a plethora of historical evidence pointing to a glorious past of relative power and authority prior to colonization. The colonial and postcolonial "fact" of the supposed subordinate status of women in precolonial times is a myth manufactured by the colonial powers to perpetuate and justify the domination of women by men. V. Y. Mudimbe has argued that the future of the continent lies in both the old and the new. An education for liberation is one that grants African women unlimited opportunities to re-invent themselves. A prophetic church in Africa should not seek the kinds of reforms that still indirectly reinforce the power and position of the racist, sexist, and classist elites. Instead, it should seek to participate in the process of creating education and social systems that truly transform.

A liberating education for African women will take seriously the call for changes in curriculum. Curricula in African educational systems need to change from being blueprints of Eurocentrism, sexism, and classism to curricula that reflect Africentric sources of education. A wealth of indigenous knowledge on the African continent remains largely unexplored. These indigenous knowledge systems contain ancient answers to many modern problems—for example, the ravished postcolonial African environment. Systems of knowledge generated in the West will not provide answers for the African reality. Historically these systems have been designed to conquer, exploit, and dominate Africans. There is very little evidence to suggest a paradigm
shift in the nature of this historic relationship. Working toward an Africentric curriculum should be an integral part of the church's prophetic vision of an African egalitarian church and society.

Finally, this prophetic church should be aware that education that liberates is not an individual intellectual activity; rather, it is an organic exercise, the initiative of an entire village. Therefore, the church should borrow its instructions for a liberating education from the people's social-historical praxis in order to give birth to a just world order.19

Notes

2. Ibid., 21.
6. Phiri, 42.
8. Ibid., 56-59.
9. Ibid., 131-32.
10. Ibid., 159.
11. Ibid., 163.
12. Ibid., 247.
13. Ibid., 220.
19. Freire, 140.
Nam-Soon Kang

A Bridge to Inclusiveness of Gender, Race, and Culture: Constructing a Theology of Inclusiveness

Since human experience is the starting point for doing theology, there is no objective, universal, value-neutral theology. Our experiences differ depending on our context and background: time, social context, gender, class, religion and ethnicity, and so forth. Even though there are always some similarities in human experience in general, there are also significant differences among people of different ethnicity, gender, class, and personality. A unique feature of feminist theology is that it uses women’s experience as a source and norm for theology—a set of experiences that has been ignored and trivialized throughout human history. Women’s experience, like human experience in general, includes experiences of the divine, the world, and the self and community. Unlike general human experience, however, women’s experience can be specified as “women’s bodily experience, women’s socialized experience . . . women’s feminist experience . . . women’s historical experience, and women’s individual experiences.”

I would like to begin this article with my experience as a woman-of-color scholar in theology. Personal experience has been the

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vital force in my theological journey and has become a catalyst for stimulating my theological reflection. But I had no map for this journey; I had to create my own.

A significant experience on the journey had to do with my appointment as teaching assistant. It happened during my first year as a doctoral student. I received a phone call from the office of the graduate school, informing and congratulating me on my appointment as a teaching assistant to a professor—a leading womanist theologian. I was more surprised and worried than glad because at that time I was having a very hard time adjusting to the new academic surroundings and to speaking English. I grew up and received my basic education in Korea. Before coming to the United States, I studied in Germany for two-and-a-half years; so I spoke English with a German-Korean accent! I dashed up to the office to meet the professor. “How could you assign me as your teaching assistant? You know I don’t speak English all that well.” The professor smiled and then said, “Nam-Soon, what my students need from you is not your ability to speak English. What they need is to hear your voice, your particular perspective. Your perspective will give them what they need to learn. That’s why I decided to appoint you as my teaching assistant; and I think you can do it very well.”

At that moment, all my fears and worries disappeared. I began to see clearly the path I needed to take, and I felt the courage to overcome the many obstacles ahead. I enjoyed and learned a great deal from my experience as teaching assistant. Some students commented that listening to a different style of speaking was in itself a learning experience of another culture for them. At the same time they learned that they needed to expand their one-sided view of the world, of Christianity, and of people of other cultures.

The second important experience on my journey was when I became a recipient of a Women-of-Color scholarship during my doctoral study. Throughout my theological studies in Korea, Germany, and the United States, I had struggled with loneliness. Unlike most male students in theology, I had no moral support or the camaraderie of colleagues. I also had insufficient financial resources to pursue my studies. I was up against some pretty formidable odds: a woman studying theology (traditionally regarded as a masculine discipline); an ethnic-minority person in an institution in which Euro-American students were predominant; and a wife and mother always struggling with managing time and with separation from family and relatives.
When I entered the doctoral program, I received a scholarship that covered only half of my tuition, with no other financial resources in sight. Even though my husband’s scholarship covered all of his tuition, we were still unable to afford the rest of my tuition. I was desperate.

In the midst of my desperation, I applied for—and received—a Woman-of-Color scholarship. This program provided me with the support that I needed—not only financial support but also opportunities to receive and give encouragement, empowerment, and moral support for my personal and theological journey. Before, I felt as if I were going through the journey without a map, without guidance, without company. But now I was able to find the financial, emotional, and moral support that I needed through the mentoring program of the Women-of-Color Program.

The third important experience in my personal and theological journey was an encounter with the bishop of the Wisconsin Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. After finishing my doctoral program in 1993, I returned to Korea, filled with expectation and excitement. It didn’t take long, however, to realize how deep-rooted the exclusion of women in leadership positions was in Korea, especially in theological institutions. Even though I was the second female graduate from the Methodist seminary in Korea with a Ph.D. in theology, I was unable to find a full-time teaching position in a seminary or the theology department of a university. Moreover, the rigid denominationalism prevalent in Korea prevented me from applying to whatever seminary happened to have a job opening. Because of this kind of exclusivist connection between denomination and school, I was supposed to apply for a position only to my alma mater. However, this was not a possibility for me, notwithstanding the fact that by that time I had published books and numerous academic articles on feminist theology and ethics and on the issues of women and religion. What mattered in getting hired as a full-time faculty member was not my academic ability but my personal background—the fact, for example, that I was a married woman whose husband happened to be a full-time professor at the seminary to which I was forced to apply. I realized that I was not regarded as a theologian in my own right. And the fact that I was academically specialized in feminist theology constituted an additional obstacle.

This experience of being excluded from a theological institution because of what seemed to me trivial reasons was very painful. On the other hand, the experience did provide me with several important
opportunities: teaching in a variety of schools as a part-time professor; getting involved in international ecumenical activities as a resource person representing Asian woman theologians; and expanding my view of the marginalized in church and society. And over the past six years, I have been trying to get institutional support for awakening the consciousness of people, enabling them to become a critical mass that will help bring into being a more just society, to actualize the kin-dom of God on earth.

It was in the midst of struggling with the situation in Korea that I met the bishop of the Wisconsin Annual Conference. She was in Korea to deliver a speech at a meeting, and I was asked to interpret her speech to the audience. Incidentally, I believe that meeting and listening to a United Methodist woman bishop was a learning experience in itself for most people in the audience; the majority of them have never met a woman bishop in their lives. After the meeting, I shared my journey with the bishop. She not only listened attentively to my story but also shared her own struggle. She then proceeded to offer me a position in the Wisconsin Annual Conference. I was surprised at her ability to move freely beyond my cultural, racial, gender, and linguistic boundaries, all the more so given the rigid exclusivism that I experienced in my home country. I accepted the invitation to be the full-time pastor of a United Methodist congregation in which 99 percent of the people were Euro-American.

I share the story of my journey at length because these experiences are the primary sources of my theology; they have shaped my perspective on God, world, and human beings. All my varied experiences have one thing in common: each involved an experience of being included and supported as a person of a different gender, race, and culture and of discriminatory boundaries being transcended. It is on the basis of these experiences that I develop the theological importance of inclusiveness and the contribution that this concept can make to the Methodist theological tradition—a tradition whose Wesleyan origins exhibit a deep sense of gender and racial inclusiveness.

“In-Between Consciousness” and Its Theological Implications

Like any other racial-ethnic group, women of color aren’t a singular entity; therefore, it is difficult to generalize about women of color and...
their experiences. Even though they share a gender or race or ethnicity, there are no homogeneous experiences and configurations of women of color. In the United States, the term women of color is used interchangeably with Third World women, thus designating a political constituency, not a biological one. The term women of color is "a sociopolitical designation for people of African, Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American decent, and native peoples of the U.S."; it also "refers to new immigrants to the U.S. in the last decade." Women of color have not only been victims of racial and gender prejudice and discrimination; they have also mounted a struggle against such prejudice and discrimination. Since women of color do not share a singular experience, in this article I illustrate the meaning of being a woman of color by drawing primarily—but not exclusively—on my own perspective and experience.

I am Asian, a woman, a feminist, and a theologian who lives simultaneously both in the United States and Asia. All these designations show who I am, what I am, and what I do—in short, my identity. My identity highlights the dynamics of being an overseas Asian in America, a feminist in Christian theology, and a woman-of-color scholar in a society and an academy in which people of color are in the minority. Since my family and relatives reside in Korea, I have been living simultaneously in the West and in Asia. Although considered culturally marginalized and "incomplete" because I don't belong totally to either of these societies, I consider such an identity a positive asset for being in the world and for doing theology today. The fact that I am not tied to one location and culture but have opportunities to understand multiple cultures and societies is a vital force in my life. I can no longer be fully satisfied with either the Asian or the American culture alone because I see the limitations that each has. At the same time, I am able to avail myself of the strength and beauty of both of these cultures and to understand multiple ideas, knowledge, and values.

Given this context, I identify myself as a specular border intellectual who lives simultaneously in two or more cultures but refuses to be tied to a single culture or country. Moreover, my use of a variety of languages—Korean, Chinese, English, and German—keeps me conscious of the one-sidedness of a single language and culture. Occupying multiple cultural spaces and imbibing a multilingual sensibility give me an in-between consciousness, which becomes my method of doing theology. In-between consciousness liberates me
from interest-bound perspectives because it enables me to incorporate in my thinking multiple cultures, races, and also gender. Jung Young Lee illustrates this in-between consciousness: "I am more than an Asian because I am an American, and I am more than an American because I am an Asian." An Asian woman of color in my position knows the United States almost as well as she knows her own culture. Because of this knowledge and experience of multiple cultures, women of color like me are able to sustain a heterogeneous subjectivity.

In-between consciousness, or multiple/plural consciousness, requires "the ability to see the ambiguities and contradictions, and to act collectively." Theologizing from the border, from the margin, I as a woman-of-color theologian am able to overcome contradictory, dualistic either-or modes of thinking and to move on to complementary, both-and ways of thinking. Both-and thinking goes beyond the subject-object dualism that leads the subject to exclude its object—the other. Dualistic modes of thinking produce a "logic of domination," which justifies and reinforces the subject's discrimination, exclusion, and oppression of the object. The logic of domination justifies "the domination of humans by gender, racial or ethnic, or class status"—a logic based on the ideology that "superiority justifies subordination." A person with "multiple consciousness" would, I believe, be able to move beyond the subject-object split and its attendant brokenness that originates in the foundation of our lives, societies, cultures, thoughts, and value systems.

In-between consciousness also gives one a new way of interpreting theological themes and a new way of approaching confrontational racial, gender, and cultural issues; for thinking from the border and with "multiple consciousness" is an inclusive and open-ended way of thinking. It is just this in-between consciousness that enables the woman-of-color scholar in theology to elaborate and promote a theology of inclusiveness—of race, gender, and culture.

The Role of the Woman-of-Color Scholar in Constructing a Theology of Inclusiveness in Methodist Theology

The issues of racism and sexism were two of the important matters in The Methodist Church in the United States during 1940–1967.
helping to define the mission and ministry of the church. The United Methodist Church is called to inclusiveness, which "denies every semblance of discrimination." There is no doubt that the Wesleyan tradition and Wesleyan theology have promoted the idea of inclusiveness in the Methodist tradition. The time has come to further expand and deepen the idea and application of inclusiveness in gender and race in Methodist theology and practice.

Wesleyan theology, with its emphasis on perfection, motivated Methodist women in the nineteenth century in the United States to be leaders in social reform movements such as women's rights, abolitionism, prison reform, and educational advancement. As is well known, Wesley allowed women to serve as local preachers, itinerant evangelists, and class leaders. Many in the Methodist movement of the nineteenth century regarded slavery as a sin, and many Methodist women were active in the abolitionist movement. Later this energy was applied to the cause of women's rights in the United States. Indeed, the First Women's Rights Convention in the United States was held at a Wesleyan Methodist church in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. It is quite likely that the theological dynamic of Wesley's basic program of reform inspired the spirit of equality between men and women and between different racial groups within the Methodist movement. For Wesley's goal was for each Methodist to have a personal, religious experience that would help transform both individual and society. Wesley's theology, thus, had a liberationist impulse, even though he was raised in a highly chauvinistic Anglican tradition. Wesley once said about women's ordination:

"Ten years ago, the idea was repugnant to me and I know the reasons why. Five years ago the idea was still repugnant to me, but my reasons no longer "held water." I was thinking differently. Now my feelings have followed good reasons for the ordination of women to the priesthood."

Considering the strong atmosphere of male supremacy and the total exclusion of women from the public sphere in Wesley's time, Wesley's ideas on women's ordination exhibit a profoundly liberating principle that can still be useful in Methodism today. Wesleyan theology and its practice at their best tend to transcend differences of gender, race, culture, and class and tend to foster a spirit of inclusiveness. Because of Wesley's spirit of inclusiveness, women exerted a significant
influence upon Methodism during its formative period, despite the
social controls and religious conventions of eighteenth-century
England. Wesley's inclusive and egalitarian sentiment should be
elaborated as one of the important factors in Methodist theology
today—particularly at a time when this inclusive and egalitarian spirit
seems to be on the wane in The United Methodist Church.

This Methodist heritage constitutes an important context for
elaborating a theology of inclusiveness that could serve the varieties
of Methodism in contemporary society. The following, I believe,
should be ingredients in any Methodist theology of inclusiveness.

First, a theology of inclusiveness is a theology of doing justice; for
it tries to erase all kinds of discrimination based on gender, race, class,
and culture. In solidarity with others it makes us move beyond walls
of exclusion and dehumanization. It is here, in particular, that
women-of-color theologians can exercise an impact on the
construction and practice of a theology of inclusiveness. They have
experienced marginality in many ways; and from their experience of
being "on the border" in terms of locality, culture, language, and
social status they are able to provide a new vision for a more just,
inclusive society. Out of the life stories and experiences of
women-of-color theologians emerge new ideas for understanding
cultural, racial, and gender differences, leading to valuing,
appreciating, and celebrating differences within the broader context of
society.

Second, a theology of inclusiveness leads us to a consciousness of
the interconnectedness with and interdependence among the people of
different cultures, races, and genders. Such a spirit of inclusiveness
leads to a recognition and practice of unity in diversity.

Third, a theology of inclusiveness seeks the transformation of self
and society. Operating on the assumption that all human beings are
equal, a theology of inclusiveness urges people to transform their
exclusive view of fellow human beings into an egalitarian view that
accepts people regardless of their gender, race, and culture. Such a
theology further seeks to transform societies in which discrimination
and exclusion based on gender and race are operating. Until people of
different colors and gender are fully accepted as equals, the theology
of inclusiveness will remain essential for theological construction in
The United Methodist Church in particular, but also ecumenically. For
we are living in a pluralistic society in terms of gender, ethnicity, and

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culture. No gender, race, or ethnic group should exercise hegemony in a pluralistic society.

**Toward a Genuinely Inclusive Theology and Church**

In the United States people of different races, cultures, ethnicity, language, and religion coexist; but their presence and differences are neglected in mainstream culture, language, education, and institutions. Recognizing and celebrating those differences may be the first step toward living together peacefully in this pluralistic society.

Just celebrating differences, however, is not enough to do justice in a concrete reality. Such celebration tends to prevent individuals who are "other" from entering the cultural mainstream because they are viewed only as belonging to a group; that is, they are viewed as part of a collective entity, not as individuals.  

In order to take this unjust situation into consideration theologically, we have both to seek an alternative mode of thinking and to redefine the task of doing theology. The task of theology is not just to interpret Christian texts and traditions but also to change and transform an unjust reality in order to bring the kingdom of God into being on earth. Otherwise, Christianity will fail.  

According to Johann Baptist Metz, Christianity has already failed. For Metz, the failure of Christianity is not theoretical or theological but practical. That is, Christianity has failed to transform the corruption and dehumanization of the world and to practice its vision of the true community. Metz asks, "Where, for example, is the historical and social basis of the claim made by Christians to be the advocates of this universal and undivided justice? Where can concrete examples of the history of liberation be found in Christianity?"

**Conclusion**

We ought to keep reminding ourselves that the main task of theology today is to transform the situation of dehumanization and exclusion of the marginalized, not just to interpret the texts and traditions of Christianity. Christianity in the twenty-first century should seek for a way to avoid failure. Restoring the egalitarian and inclusive sentiments inherent in Wesleyan theology can open up profound
theological resources in Methodism, something that is urgently needed in our time of division and conflict.

Envisioning a community of equality and justice requires openness to a multicultural and multilingual reality. Otherwise there is no way for us to understand and embrace people of different races, languages, and cultures. New voices, new cultures, new experiences, and new perspectives representing the pluralism within theology and church will allow us to speak authentically about a theology of inclusiveness. With their different voices and experiences, women-of-color scholars can promote the practice and growth of a theology of inclusiveness. The very presence of women-of-color scholars in theology represents many of the struggles for justice in United Methodist theology. Only when we listen attentively to the voices of those who have been marginalized and silenced will change and transformation occur, both in the church and the society.

Notes


2. "Kin-dom of God," instead of "kingdom of God," comes from Maria Isasi-Díaz, a Mujerista theologian. She argues that the word kingdom is sexist, because it presupposes that God is male and that the reign of God is hierarchical and elitist. The word kin-dom symbolizes that "we will all be sisters and brothers—kin to each other" when the fullness of God is actualized in the world. See Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 103.


7. Gloria Anzaldúa coined the term *mestiza consciousness* to refer to this multiple consciousness. See her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).

9. I need to be clear about how I use the term both-and in this essay. I reject that use of the term in Asian culture that avoids, in the name of "harmony" or "comple­mentarity," the need for critical, ethical judgment on the part of both parties. Such a move often justifies and perpetuates the sexist, hierarchical imbalance of power between two parties in a subtle but potent way in many Asian societies. I use the term both-and in a reconceptualized form to denote a sense of equivalence between the two parties in a particular conceptual framework.


12. Ibid., ¶ 117.


17. Ibid.
Religion, Humanization, and World Transformation

From the Korean point of view, education (kyo yuk) is understood as a process of human cultivation through which human beings—women and men—emerge; that is, we humans construct ourselves as human beings. We also build families, societies, and institutions, even in some way reality itself.

I understand theological education to be the process of cultivating Christian leaders, clergy as well as laity. Seminary professors like me participate in the process of cultivating future church leaders who can implement the experience, knowledge, and insights gained through theological education to cultivate "new" Christians who can cooperate in reconstructing the polities, systems, and structures of the church. In this regard, theological education becomes indispensable for the metamorphosis of the life of the church.

In this article I discuss the role of religion in the process of humanization (the process of human cultivation and development) and the construction of the world (reality or the cosmos). Based on this largely sociological discussion, I argue for the need for Christian educators and church leaders to rethink the task of Christian cultivation and mission in the context of the world community of the twenty-first century.

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A Social-Psychological Theory of Human Development

Human beings are social products; that is, they become who they are through social interaction. Building on Charles H. Cooley's seminal notion of the "looking-glass self," sociologists have explained the social nature of the process of human development. George H. Mead in his work *On Social Psychology* distinguishes two phases in the social process of human development or socialization. The initial socialization occurs in the family. In the interaction in the family the parents, "significant others," play a critical role. By providing, facilitating, and regulating certain values, rules, lifestyles, and worldviews, parents mold and fashion children's minds and behaviors. At the same time, by accepting and practicing the values and manners taught and imposed, children interact not only with the parents but also with people, the "generalized others," outside the home environment. For example, children learn and practice how to smile, eat, talk, walk, think, and behave. When they receive positive responses from parents and other people, they continue practicing these behaviors. However, negative responses can hinder children from engaging in these acts. In any event, it is by engaging in these actions that the child develops a certain consciousness and set of behaviors. This is the primary stage of socialization in which the social process consists of mere mechanical imitation. Through this phase of mechanical mimicking there emerges a social self who is a representation of the "significant others" or parents and their values and manners. Mead views this social self as incomplete because it is the product of a process of mere acceptance and adjustment to external objects. The complete self—the subjective I—results from a second phase, which involves a cognitive process of internalization; that is, rationalization. The subjective self can rationalize experiences and feelings and reflect upon learning and upon practices. The subjective self is autonomous, consciously choosing to continue with inherited behaviors, to compromise them, or to create new behaviors and values. For Mead, the subjective self represents the complete person.

Mead's argument is insightful and helpful in many ways. For example, no one doubts his emphasis on family influence—particularly that of the parents—in the development of the child's personality. Books like *The Birth of the Living God* emphasize the significance of upbringing for character formation and development of
relationships. Nevertheless, Mead's theory is not without problems in
our contemporary social setting in which family structures have been
transformed. The "traditional family" (consisting of mother, father,
and child[ren]), though still predominant, is no longer the sole
paradigm. Single-parent families are commonplace, and there are
more and more gay and lesbian couples who choose to raise children.
Additionally, some children are raised by grandparents and relatives.
A considerable number of youngsters live without the intimate,
personal care and/or supervision provided by "significant others," like
parents or guardians. Many live in orphanages, prisons, or other
institutions. Furthermore, we should not forget about the growing
number of homeless children in our society. Also, the proliferation of
multiple values today undermines traditional systems of authority,
such as those of parent(s) and families. Parents, in general, have lost
much of their authority and in many cases are no longer regarded as
authority figures. The impact of such "significant others" has,
therefore, diminished dramatically.

Mead's second stage, the emergence of the subjective self, may be
even more problematic because of its connection with autonomy.
Autonomy is often inseparably related to the acquisition of power.
Self-development—becoming a complete and autonomous
person—requires the availability and exercise of power. As a
consequence, those who are powerless in terms of race, gender,
religion, culture, or economic status may be unable to fully develop
their personalities and may thus be less than "full" persons.

Despite problems like these, Mead's social-psychological
understanding of human development raises an important point. It is
human beings who produce other human beings. That is, we become
who we are through an intentional process of "human making."

But humans do not limit their creative activity to cultivating their
own species. They extend their creativity to the universe—the
cosmos—itself. They construct organizations (such as churches,
temples, synagogues, and mosques), communities, societies,
nations—in short, they construct reality. Peter Berger in his work The
Sacred Canopy illustrates this human activity of reality building; he
calls this process "cosmization."

There are three stages to cosmization: objectivation, internalization,
and externalization. The initial stage, objectivation, comprises a
period of adjusting to the world. Accommodation to the preexisting
context is a prerequisite for the survival of any organism—and
humans are no exception. For children, for example, the world—objective reality—exists "out there." To survive they simply have to adjust to this objective world embodied by their families. Through rudimentary learning or even instinct children adapt to the objective environment. Such adaptation continues even in adult life. For example, if they want to survive, Korean immigrants in the United States must adjust to their new reality. That means they have to learn the English language, American cultural mores and values, governmental policies, and how the educational system and the country’s laws function. Failing to adjust, or rejecting the new culture, may result in existential maladjustment. In this initial period of adjustment, the immigrant accepts the preexisting, objective, social world uncritically.

After the initial stage, a cognitive process called "rationalization" follows. In this second phase the subject analyzes, reflects upon, and evaluates the feelings and experiences that accompany adjustment to the existing "objective" reality. Berger names this cognitive activity "internalization." I will use the experience of Korean immigrant women as an example. These women have been shaped in a neo-Confucian, patriarchal culture in which working outside the home is considered taboo. Homemaking is the only socially and culturally sanctioned vocation for women. However, the majority of Korean immigrant women in the United States find themselves in the workplace. This creates tension with their traditional role as homemakers. Since they are still expected to do household chores—cooking, cleaning, shopping, child-rearing—many of these women become overworked and exhausted in trying to be faithful to both roles. Recognizing the inequity of the situation, the immigrant woman may begin to question her traditional role as homemaker. At this point, she may decide either to maintain the traditional role or to modify it. It is this rationalizing activity that Berger calls "internalization."

The third phase, called "externalization," emerges from the internalization process. This is the phase of constructive action based on rationalization. To illustrate I will again use the case of a Korean immigrant woman. At this third stage, the woman may ask her husband to share the burden of the household. If he refuses, she may stop cooking. Or she may eat alone with her children, ignoring him. Alternatively, the husband may decide, with compunction and/or reluctance, to share the burden. He may agree to cook once a week,
swallowing the bitter shame because a man's involvement in the domestic arena has been strictly prohibited both socially and culturally. In this case, change occurs not only in the roles of husband and wife but also in their relationship and in the whole family pattern. Thus, the traditional family pattern, in which the man is the provider and the women the servant, can be modified.

Of course, the opposite can also occur. The wife may decide to continue to do double duty: working both inside and outside the home. She may justify her decision in terms of an essential Confucian value, hyun mo yang 'chu. Or she may appeal to Christian beliefs to justify her decision, arguing that her work burden is a sacrifice for her husband and family. She may identify her act with Jesus' vicarious death for the salvation of humanity. Her analysis may also be based on a set of practical reasons. If her complaining and her insistence that her husband share the work leads to domestic violence, she may decide to endure the situation for the sake of the children or to accept it as her fate. In such a case, no change occurs. The couple maintains the traditional gender roles and the patriarchal and hierarchical family structure.

Berger's theory focuses on the human activity—mechanical and intentional—that leads to the transformation of reality. His theory of cosmization sounds a lot like Mead's notion of human development. However, Mead's theory works on a microcosmic level, while Berger's theory of cosmization refers to a macrocosmic activity. Berger's theory raises a number of logical and practical difficulties—particularly, his argument about externalization, which once again raises the issue of autonomy and power. Racial and ethnic minorities have yet to obtain full access to power and autonomy in United States culture. Korean women, including immigrant woman, have been excluded from the construction of culture because they are viewed as subject to men. Euro-White men still exercise enormous power in the construction of United States society and culture. While their situation has improved significantly, racial minorities still lack adequate power for full participation in American politics and social construction.

Religion and Social Process

In developing themselves and constructing their reality human beings are architects, so much so that Karl Marx could refer to the human
being as homo faber—"man the maker." In this work of constructing societies and a universe, Berger argues, religion plays the indispensable role of legitimation: "Religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality. The tenuous realities of the social world are grounded in the sacred realissimum, which by definition is beyond the contingencies of human meanings and human activity." For Berger legitimation has to do with "socially objectivated knowledge," which serves to explain and justify the social order. In other words, "legitimations are answers to any questions about the 'why' of institutional arrangements." Legitimation, then, must be related to cognitive activity, to reasoning. Religion provides the reasoning to explain why and what things are and why they happen, thus helping people to make sense of their reality. Believers use religious teachings and ideals, doctrines, and beliefs to defend and justify their values, decisions, and behaviors, and to accept, accommodate, or reject aspects of the social world. For example, when a seemingly incomprehensible, unexpected, or unacceptable event occurs (such as an accident, disaster, or extreme suffering), people try to make sense of the experience and try to accept it. This allows people to continue with life and to continue to find the world—the reality in which they live—meaningful and sustainable. The outbreak of the cholera epidemic in 1832 took hundreds of thousands of lives in the United States. Many Americans interpreted this tragedy as God's punishment on their moral delinquency. Christian preachers urged their congregations to improve morally, arguing that such improvement would act as a "guarantor of health." More recently, AIDS came to the public's attention. I can still remember the many American Christians (for example, ethnic Koreans) who viewed the illness as a sign of God's condemnation of homosexuals for engaging in dissolute sexual behavior. Undoubtedly, in such cases, Christianity, by providing rational and moral principles, offers for believers the rational framework in terms of which to comprehend such contingencies. Christianity also plays a significant role in maintaining the existing social order and structure, as Berger points out, by providing a biblical rationale for mores and actions. Korean-American Christian women, for example, mobilize biblical rationalization in order to justify their strategies for adapting to United States society. The research that I did for my book Women Struggling for a New Life reveals three models of
accommodation. In the first model the woman maintains the traditional image of the Korean woman and the patriarchal culture inherent in the Confucian legacy. She justifies the woman’s inferior status by referring to Gen. 2:23: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” She may also continue to preserve the male-dominated structure of her family and church, claiming Paul’s injunction to the Ephesians: “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church” (5:22-23a). In this case, Christian principles serve to legitimize the existing reality. Virtually no personal or structural transformation takes place.

In the second model women begin to raise questions about gender and status discrimination. They advocate for gender equality appealing to biblical texts like Genesis 1:26a, 27: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Or they claim Paul’s affirmation in Gal. 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for they are all one in Christ Jesus.” In this model, too, the Bible functions as the primary source of reasoning and rationalization.

Some women in the third model appeal to these same biblical texts to challenge the present patriarchal systems and structures of Korean American families and churches. They refuse to be a mere “appendix” to men and insist on gender equality at home and in church. While such advocacy has resulted in some changes, patriarchy is still very much alive. To be sure, more women assume leadership roles in church (for example, as committee chairpersons); however, their skills and abilities are still not yet fully recognized, utilized, and appreciated. Also, my research and casual observation have shown that more men appear to share domestic chores, such as doing laundry, vacuuming, and grocery shopping, besides their “traditional” jobs of mowing the lawn and taking out the garbage. For Korean-American Christian women, Christianity undoubtedly functions as the central legitimizing agent for their self-formation (micro level) and their construction of reality (macro level).

Berger’s more significant insight about religious legitimation has to do with the role of the sacred. What makes religious justification so forceful is the sacred. This leads to several questions: What exactly is
the sacred and what makes it so powerful? And how is the sacred related to the process of religious legitimation? Ultimately, these questions lead us to the basic question of what religion is.

Religion may be defined in a wide variety of ways, depending on one's perspective and experience. For his part, Berger defines religion as "cosmization in a sacred mode. By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience." 13 Berger chooses to concentrate on the religious significance of the believer's construction of a cosmos in relation to the power of the sacred.

At this point, the definition of religion by Émile Durkheim can be helpful for better understanding the power of the sacred in religious reasoning and in the process of cosmization. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim says:

> Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. 14

According to Durkheim there are three essential things in religion: beliefs, praxis, and congregation or group. Religion defines both what is sacred and what is mundane. The sacred is elevated over the mundane or secular. This elevated status signifies the sacred's extraordinary authority and power transcending all boundaries and limits set by the secular. Simply speaking, the sacred means transcendental power and authority. As a result, anything sacred—ideas, figures, and objects—is prohibited from being challenged.

Furthermore, the sacred enters concrete reality through the practice of rituals. The rite—for example, a worship service—is the tangible actualization of the intangible (the sacred). Through worship, the transcendental sacred becomes a powerful entity. Preaching or teaching in the context of the worship service has significant power over believers. More important is the action of repetition associated with ritual. By repeatedly and collectively reading the sacred texts, hearing teachings, praying and singing hymns, and reciting creeds, participants' consciousness and manners are shaped and molded by
the sacred ideas and figures. This implies that ritual produces people united around shared values, lifestyles, and worldviews.

One can thus say that religion is an organized system of ideology and beliefs that become materialized through rites and concerted activities. With systematic ideas about the sacred and with structured praxis, religion produces a unified group of people. Therefore, religion plays a significant role in the process of human development—for individuals as well as groups—and inevitably impacts social transformation.

Nonetheless, the idea of the sacred as the universal essence of religion is questionable. East Asian religions, such as Confucianism and Taoism (including Buddhism), do not seem to share Christianity's notions of the sacred; namely, the sacred as mysterious and awesome reality. However, if the sacred is understood as the authority or engineering power of social control, then, for example, neo-Confucianism does possess a sacred reality. For example, *li* in the Korean Yi Dynasty served as a moral, social, and legal authority. Also, Korean Shamanism did not develop an official body similar to the church; therefore, it can be problematic to apply literally or adopt uncritically Durkheim's definition of religion.

Despite these caveats the role of religion in the process of personal and social development cannot be underestimated. Max Weber in his work *The Religion of China* argues that Confucian China produced *gentlemen/noblemen* (*chun tzu*) as the ideal type that embodies the ideals of the religion. Likewise, the Yi Dynasty—the last kingdom of Korea—has produced ideal types. For example, the Confucian ethical principle, *Sam-Gang-O-Ryun,* has functioned as the sacred to shape the consciousness and behaviors of Koreans, women and men alike. This ethical principle erected both vertical and horizontal relationships for Koreans. Accordingly, men and seniors, depending on age and status, should be revered while women and juniors should occupy a lower position. Also, the latter's loyalty and submission to the former was mandatory. Using the same principle, the structure of family, government, and society was formed based on a hierarchy of gender: men at the top and women at the bottom. Any deviation or violation could be subjected to penalties, even death. Though Confucianism is no longer Korea's national religion, its influence still prevails in the life of Koreans and also in Korean-American families and churches in the United States.

I should point out that the Korean people and society are largely
multireligious. Various religions—Confucianism, Shamanism, Taoism, Buddhism, folk religions, and Christianity—have flourished in Korea, so much so that a nineteenth-century American missionary depicted the Korean people in this way: "Koreans have a Confucian mind, a Buddhist heart, and a Shamanic gut." Koreans are multireligious, and Korean society and culture are composed of a plurality of religions.

Korean Christians are thus religious "hybrids." The emotional and spontaneous preaching style and gestures of Christian revivalists resemble shamans in trance during the performance of kut. Korean Christian prayers, predominantly centered on invocation of personal blessing, are reminiscent of the shamans entreating spirits to bless the petitioners. Christian generosity through offerings can be compared to the shamanistic expectation of unlimited divine reciprocity. Shamans commonly bargain with deities by offering them more money or food for the bountiful repayment to the petitioner(s). Thus, multiple religions have shaped the Korean people—women and men—and also Korean Christians, including Korean-American Christians. The Korean culture and reality—the Korean "cosmos"—is a multireligious composite.

Western culture (Europe and North America), too, has been deeply influenced by Christianity. Max Weber in his classic study The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism notes the relationship between the development of the Protestant work ethic and the emergence of capitalism and its attendant worldview. The Calvinistic emphasis on calling, predestination, and diligence in all of life motivated Puritans to take their vocations—their work—very seriously. Consequently, Puritans cultivated frugal and ascetic work manners, stressing hard work and denouncing pleasure seeking and a lavish lifestyle. Furthermore, the emphasis on Christian stewardship (Matt. 25:14-30) must have contributed to the Puritans' simple lifestyle and their consequent increase of capital. Wesley's well-known exhortation to Methodists to gain all they can and to save all they can—in effect, to grow rich—has evidently spurred a rational, calculated, and systematic work ethic that contributed to producing Methodist workaholics.

Likewise, throughout 2,000 years of Christian history, the church has produced various Christian ideal types; for example, charity workers, community builders, caretakers, human-rights activists, and peacekeepers. In times of disaster and crisis, such as the North Korean
famine and the recent earthquake in Turkey, Christian groups and individuals, along with government and international service personnel, have participated in rescue work. These Christian ideal types have embodied Christian sacred ideals for the promotion of the well-being of humanity and the world community.

On the other hand, religions—the producers of ideal types—have also contributed to division and violence on personal, social, and cosmic levels. As Durkheim has already suggested, religious unity can also generate hatred and an antagonistic attitude. By uniting those who share the same beliefs, values, and behaviors, religion clearly defines who is in and who is out. Both world and church history have witnessed numerous incidents of hatred, violence, genocide, and wars motivated by religion. Take, for example, the heady disputes and violence that accompanied the process of canonizing Scripture in the early church; or consider the extermination of heretics by the infamous Inquisition, not to mention the “holy war” between Christians and Moslems in the Middle Ages. In the modern age, witness the horror of the Holocaust or the age-old conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

The United States has not been free from religiously inspired violence either. One only has to think of recent events such as the shootings at a Jewish campsite in Los Angeles on Aug. 10, 1999, or white Christian supremacist acts of violence targeted at an ethnic group in Indiana on July 4, 1999. Or consider the violent attacks against homosexuals and pro-abortion clinics and personnel. As social theories explore violence and as historical and empirical facts bear witness, can anybody claim that Christianity does not bear a measure of guilt for its complicity in societal acts of violence?

It is also true, of course, that ever since the Enlightenment the impact of religions—particularly Christianity—on societies has diminished drastically. The increasing prominence and prestige of “profane” activities such as science, technology, industry, mass media, mass transportation, entertainment, and so forth have contributed to the decline of the cultural influence of the sacred. Furthermore, the process of secularization, propelled by existential forces such as pluralization and globalization, has expedited the weakening of the authority and power of the sacred outside the confines of a religious group. Consequently, the impact of religion on both a personal and societal level has decreased significantly.

Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to underestimate the power and
impact of religion—especially the Christian religion—on society. In a 1991 article, *The New York Times* indicates that 90.1 percent of U.S. Americans are affiliated with religions. This means that 9 out of 10 U.S. Americans practice some form of religion, with Christianity (Protestant and Catholic) claiming 86.5 percent of the population’s loyalty. In addition, a news program on a major television network recently reported that 95 percent of U.S. Americans believe in God, with born-again Christians claiming 45 percent of the total. These surveys appear to support Robert Bellah’s article “Civil Religion in America,” in which Bellah chronicles the pervasive influence of Christianity in United States society. In light of these statistics, it is easy to conjecture that Christianity will continue to influence not only the population of the United States but also people around the world given the United States’s status as “superpower” and its ubiquitous involvement in world affairs.

Conclusion

The critical question now becomes this: What kinds of Christians should the church in the twenty-first century produce? This question is aimed specifically at Christian educators—seminary professors in particular—and the institutional church, for together they are responsible for producing leaders for the church. For their part, these leaders develop and mold Christians in ministerial contexts that are becoming ever more diverse and global. Our pluralistic world requires open-minded, empathetic, and cooperative leaders—clergy as well as lay. The curricula, pedagogy, study materials, liturgy, language, and the mission and vision of both seminaries and congregations must be ready to face the challenges of a pluralistic global reality. For example, Christian educational ventures might benefit greatly from interreligious studies and literature or from experimenting with cross-cultural approaches to education. To cultivate the virtues of open-mindedness and collaboration, seminaries and churches might engage in the study of other religious traditions and in so doing expose themselves to other peoples and cultures.

As a positive response to our contemporary situation, the ecumenical church and theological schools in recent years—particularly since Vatican II—have paid concerted attention to interreligious studies and cross-cultural concerns. The United
Methodist Church is one example: It established the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns in 1968. Another example is the several courses on Living Religions and World Religions that I teach regularly at United Theological Seminary, a United Methodist-related seminary.

However, much confusion and discord still exists in Christian communities around these issues. The church and academic institutions often have sharply different perspectives on the issues of interreligious and cross-cultural studies as well as their implications for the church’s teaching and praxis. For example, in my experience as a seminary professor the majority of students come to my classes with the naïve, yet ardent zeal that the whole world should be Christianized. When we explore together the aims and directives of the World Religions course, the initial question for many students is: Why do we have to learn about other religions if our purpose is not to convert them to Christianity? They are quite articulate in justifying their stance by reciting the Great Commission in Matt. 28:19-20a: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” When it becomes clear that the intent of the course is to learn about other religions and not to convert them, many of these students are offended and confused. And like warriors many of them rally to defend the church. Yet, by the end of the course many of these same students express appreciation for the knowledge—even insight and experiences—gained through studying other religions. They also often express a feeling of being liberated, saying something like: “We Christians are not the only ones who work to redeem the whole world. Other religions, like Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Shamanism, aim at personal and cosmic well-being and peace, too. We should work together with others to make this world better. I feel much freer now; my burdens have been reduced.”

Of course reality outside the classroom is much more perplexing. “Triumphalistic Christian conquerism” (my term)—that is, the quest for the conversion and Christianization of the whole world—still sets the tone and mood in many Christian communities and educational institutions. I recently went to a fund-raising worship service for scholarships in missiology at a theological school. The Great Commission was boldly inscribed on the bulletin. Worshipers recited the biblical text as a way of reassuring themselves of the goal of world
Christianization. Also, one still commonly encounters Christian vocabularies and attitudes that are clearly triumphalist in tone—from church sanctuaries and seminary chapels to hymnals and worship bulletins, from preaching and teaching to educational materials. These vocabularies and attitudes seem to suggest that Christianity has a monopoly on salvation: only Jesus (through the church) brings salvation to all. As long as such a spirit and such attitudes exist, peace and harmony on earth will remain an unrealistic dream. Or to put the matter in the language we have been using in this article: Much of Christianity still seems intent on producing divisive ideal types with the aim of uniting the whole universe under the Christian banner.

In the face of such triumphalism in many Christian quarters, seminarians may find it very difficult to use the knowledge and insights gained in seminary courses like mine in ministerial settings, both in the local church and in institutional settings. To pass a course and to eventually graduate, many students will write boldly about the benefits of interreligious and cross-cultural dialogue; however, when they face boards of ordained ministry and when they think about "surviving" in the church, they may end up saying something very different about these issues.

No wonder seminarians are confused and defensive and faculty are frustrated. No wonder church leaders seem to make ambiguous statements. No wonder Christians appear to many people to be hypocrites. No wonder humanity and the world often needlessly suffer violence in the midst of religious confusion and indecisiveness.

If confusion is a sign of growing and maturing, then the ability to clarify ideas and perspectives is the fruit of maturity. Christians should make a diligent effort to clarify their perspectives on interreligious and cross-cultural issues because after 2,000 years of existence the church should have a measure of maturity. A mature Christian church should reevaluate its past and present ministry, reflecting carefully on the meaning of ideals like the Great Commission and Jesus' vision of the reign of God for our pluralistic present. A mature Christian church must become aware of its significance as an important member of the global religious community and its indispensable role as participant in humanization and world transformation. Finding ways to cooperate with other religious communities will mean that Christians will no longer spend precious energy aspiring to "conquer the world." Rather they will put that energy into working toward human welfare and
world peace. Surely, this is not an easy or a simple task. Yet Christianity can and must engage in this grand vision, drawing on wisdom cultivated throughout its 2,000-year experience.

To fulfill the great task of humanization and world transformation the church and educational bodies must be held accountable. Working together with passion and conviction, they should educate and cultivate mature Christian leaders who are sensitive to our global reality and competent to cooperate with others in a diverse world and whose compassion extends to all humanity. Such leaders will be able to cultivate Christians who are mature human beings and responsible world citizens. Mature and responsible humans, for their part, can work toward clarifying theological confusion and overcoming the atrocities, divisions, and violence that are so often generated by differences in skin color, gender, sexual orientation, worldview, lifestyles, religious affiliation, and social, cultural, economic, and political context. World citizens would work together to improve human welfare and transform the world at all levels: family, church, community, society, and nation.

Notes


7. *Hyun mo yang chu* means "wise mother and good wife." It has been an essential virtue for Korean women.

8. Ai Ra Kim, ch. 4.


10. Berger, 32.

11. Ibid., 29.


17. The term means "three bonds and five relationships." The principle of "three bonds" is filial piety: the subject's loyalty to the king, the younger brother's to the elder brother, the wife's to the husband. The "five relationships" were set up on the principle of reverence (obedience) and love: the subject's respect for the king and the king's care for the subject; the younger brother's respect for the elder brother and the elder brother's care for the younger; the wife's respect for the husband and the husband's care for the wife; children's respect for their parents and the parents' care for the children; the junior's respect for the senior and the senior's care for the junior.


19. Ai Ra Kim, 21-22. *Kur* is the major ritual of Korean Shamanism. It consists of music, dancing, food, and people. The major purpose is to secure well-being, the healing of the living, and reconciliation between the spirits and the living.


The man came forward to greet me after the worship service, holding out his hand containing a small stone. I recognized the stone immediately. About three years ago I had preached a sermon titled "You are the One" at his local church. I used two biblical accounts: the story of Nathan’s parable (2 Sam. 12:1-15a), through which Nathan challenged David about taking Uriah’s wife and life, and the story of Jesus’ response to the Pharisees when they brought to him the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11). The purpose of my sermon was to help the worshipers recognize the need for self-examination as a way of determining their participation in acts of injustice in our world (something we readily decry). I concluded the sermon by offering each of them a small stone to keep in pocket or purse as a reminder that only the one who is free from sin, guiltless, and free of behavior that contributes to wrong and injustice can throw the first stone.

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The man showed me his stone and told me that he had carried it in his pocket ever since as a reminder to examine himself before judging others. Imagine my surprise and the joy that followed. Someone had carried the message home and still carried it into his life three years later! What more could a preacher ask?

As I reflected on the man's affirmation of my sermon style, I began to recall other instances when persons have told me that they remembered my sermon because of the images associated with the message. At one congregation that I served, a parishioner once told me that she had frequently thought about a sermon that I preached months before in which I used a shirt as an image. During the sermon, titled "Mending the Holes in Your Faith," I would cut a hole in the shirt every time I cited something that diminished our faith. Later, as I talked about things that increased our faith, I would sew up the holes one by one. The shirt, the holes, and the mending prompted the parishioner to think about the issues that affected the level and shape of her faith.

I have also used the images of "bridge" and "bridge building" in a variety of settings, including college graduations. My use of the image was inspired by the poem "It Is Deep," by Carolyn M. Rodgers in her book *how i got ovah*. She writes:

My mother, religious-negro, proud of
having waded through a storm, is very obviously,
a sturdy Black bridge that I
crossed over, on.²

Earlier this year I encountered a former student of mine in an orientation for the Practice in Ministry and Mission Program at Wesley Theological Seminary. She had come as a learning partner for one of the students. I led the devotions for the event, using the story of Paul's rejection of John Mark (Acts 15:36-41) and his later call for John Mark to come to be his companion (2 Tim. 4:11). Using a magnifying glass, I talked about the fact that each of us uses a "magnifying glass" to magnify either the strengths or the weaknesses of others. The former student told me afterwards that the magnifying glass prompted her to think about a sermon that she had heard me preach on another occasion—a sermon that had sustained her and kept her on course during seminary. In that sermon I had spoken of times and places in our lives where we find ourselves standing on the edge of a precipice. One step in the wrong direction can send us down a
slippery slope. The image of a “slippery slope” stayed with this student, and it provided guidance on several occasions in her life when she found herself on a precipice. She was also able to help fellow students identify situations that could lead them down a slippery slope. She ended the conversation with these words: “I want to be able to preach like that. I want to be able to preach so that people can really use what I say in their lives.” People want sermons that are relevant to the experiences of their lives.

People often talk about how “good” a sermon was. Yet within hours of hearing the sermon they can relate neither the content nor the theological point of the sermon. This raises the question about the effectiveness of the message. What good did the sermon produce, after all? What was the point of taking the time to create and deliver and to hear and respond to a sermon whose impact does not reach beyond the worship setting?

Culture as Context

Observers of United States culture are aware of our dependence on the visual. Children, in particular, receive information primarily through images. Television is replacing newspapers as the primary source of news. Videos, video games, and advertisements—all give impetus to this visual orientation. Words alone are no longer enough to capture and hold attention.

Our senses are the windows through which information is communicated. Only when information is effectively communicated and absorbed into our consciousness are we able to use that information to deal with the various situations of our lives. In his study of children, Jean Piaget notes that the first vehicle for learning is the concrete. Children must see, hear, taste, and handle something in order to learn. For example, a child learns to count only when he or she associates concrete objects with the numbers, relating one object with each number. Even when the child is able to say the numbers in the correct order, the child is not really counting until he or she associates each number with an object. As they grow older, children use pictures or symbols of objects to accomplish the same thing, thus obtaining the ability to learn through the semiconcrete. Much later they gain the ability to associate the written number with the concept that it represents. Then the written number becomes a symbol for
something that is not visually present. But the process begins with being able to actually see something concrete.

How has the church responded to the visual orientation of our culture and to the way people in our culture obtain knowledge? The architecture of some older church buildings suggests that earlier generations recognized the importance of images. The cross, for example, can be found in virtually every one of these buildings—a visual symbol of what Christianity is. Stained-glass windows portray biblical and Christian images, while the construction and placement of furnishings send messages about what Christians believe. The symbols on clerical gowns and stoles, furniture, paraments, and banners are an indication that we understand the communicative power of images. Once selected, however, these images quickly become fixed and static; and they rarely change. Regular worshipers soon fail to be conscious of the presence of these images and may really attend to them only when visitors are present or when an image is changed or removed. Powerful symbols of our faith become merely part of the woodwork. They stop stimulating us to think, reaffirm, and acknowledge who we are as children of God and followers of the Christ. We don’t see them anymore; they lose their meaning.

The main vehicle for ongoing teaching and disciplining of believers is the spoken word. But this word is often devoid of good imagery and is rarely accompanied by images and symbols brought into the worship environment to stimulate us visually. Robert Long notes:

Recognized as a major problem is the massive shift from an auditory to a visual domination of culture. The pulpit is not immune to the shift. The words used in a sermon should build mental pictures for the congregation. Today’s church is composed of individuals with a low tolerance for philosophical sentences. The popular preachers draw their hearers vivid word portraits.  

Henry Mitchell, speaking of Black preaching, concurs:

There is a radical difference between listening to an essay designed to enlighten and listening to a Word desperately needed to sustain life. This latter kind of gospel registers in all sectors of consciousness, and it is remembered and used in life . . . . The Black ancestors and their offspring had and have little temptation
The power of visual stimulation is employed effectively only when preachers use concrete objects as images to help carry the message of the sermon or teaching, images that are unique and relevant to the sermon or lesson.

We have failed to use what has been known through the ages. Scripture reveals that messengers from God have known and used the power of imagery. Recall Jeremiah at the potter's shed, or Ezekiel's wheel in a wheel. Paul talked about earthen vessels. Just the mention of these images stirs within us the message for which the images became the vehicles. These images have entered our lives permanently and their messages can be recalled just by mentioning the images. Jesus knew this. He consistently used images to carry the weight of his message. We call these images "parables"; but they are actually sermons with a highly developed and effective use of images. Once you hear them, you understand the point and can remember both image and parable. To the faithful these pericopes have become favorite New Testament stories. The seed, the coin, the lost lamb and shepherd, the fig tree, and rocks are but a few of the concrete things from the world of the New Testament to which is now attached a theological point—a message of faith that we who live 2,000 years later can still access. All we need to do is to recall the object in relationship to Jesus' teaching.

To make his message plain and portable Jesus used objects that people encountered in the ordinary conduct of their lives. Perhaps Jesus thought that when his hearers encountered such objects in their daily living they would recall his message. We preachers claim to have Jesus as the model for our living. Why not use his example to guide us in understanding how to create effective sermons and teaching experiences?

The Role of the Sermon

What we preach must have meaning that speaks to the day-to-day experience of those who hear us. Howe notes that preachers must feel both "responsible for and respond to patterns of experience and understanding" that the listeners bring to the sermon. In other words, preaching must interest the hearers.
David Buttrick in *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* states that "sermons build a world, a faith-world, in consciousness, made from images, metaphors, illustrations, and examples." These help people make connections between the truth of the sermon and the experiences of their own lives and become the vehicles through which the effective preacher achieves the tasks of preaching. The images, illustrations, metaphors, and examples are the vehicles that carry the message into the ongoing lives of the congregation. The sermon is not an event unto itself—a Sunday thing, set apart from ordinary life. It is a connector to the Mondays of our lives. Robert Long notes:

> When people leave their pews they go back into the wider society. They take with them the message, in some form, an opinion of the messenger, and their personal attitude about the relative importance of that spoken word. They deposit something of those reflections in the lives of others. . . . By preaching in sharp, clear word images the preacher not only improves the chances of communicating to the gathered fellowship but in time to the wider community through the church released into its world.7

How can this happen if preaching does not remove the obstacles to hearing and understanding the message, thus opening a meaning that is relevant and that goes beyond the walls of the sanctuary?

**What Makes a Sermon Image Effective?**

The simple answer to this question is *inspiration*. The image must be inspired; that is, it must reflect the Spirit of God, who connects to the human spirit in its current need, situation, and cultural context. In his use of imagery in *God's Trombones*, James Weldon Johnson gives some hint of the old-time Negro preacher's understanding of how effective imagery carries the message into the minds of the hearers.

The best-known "trombone" is *The Creation.* The biblical creation stories in *Genesis* 1 and 2 present God the Creator bringing the world into being through the power of the spoken word. God's voice and imagination called things into being. But the power of the people to whom the black preacher addressed his message did not reside in what they said. Their power lay in what they could *do with their*
hands to eke out a living and survive in a world that did not value them as fully human and fully deserving of claiming themselves to be created in God's image. So Johnson pictures God as creating the world through the use of God's hands:

Then God reached out and took the light in his hands,
And God rolled the light around in his hands
Until he made the sun:
And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world.

When God sees how hot and barren the earth is, God's hands again come into play:

He clapped his hands, and the thunders rolled—
And the waters above the earth came down,
The cooling waters came down.

God's hands do the creative work of producing all the animals:

Then God raised his arm and he waved his hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And he said: Bring forth! Bring forth!
And quicker than God could drop his hand,
Fishes and fowls
And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods,
And split the air with their wings.

Even after all this God remained lonely. While sitting with his head in his hands, God thinks of a remedy for the situation. Using his hands, God fashioned the human being:
Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image.  

Not only could the black listener—whose hands are worn, scarred, achy, and tired—connect with this God who works with holy hands; he or she could also see him or herself emerging from the lump of clay God fashions into God's image. God inspired soul into the clay in his hands, and the listener was able to breathe in refreshment for living—a sense of being owned and created by God.

Johnson's imaginative reworking of the creation narratives uses a technique that many black preachers already employ. Henry Mitchell puts it this way: "[T]he Black preacher, whether in folk mode or working from a background of professional training, has been apt to trade 'learned' language for indigenous vocabulary, familiar images and metaphors, and common experience. This has been thought of as making it plain. . ."  

Thomas Long lumps stories, examples, experiences, and images in preaching under the category illustrations. Calling illustrations "windows on the word," Long notes the problem inherent in their use: Hearers are frequently more engaged by the illustrative material than they are by the main thread of the sermon. In other words, people cherish and remember the "windows" and promptly forget whatever it was that the windows were supposed to be illuminating! The use of images must assiduously guard against this danger.

Effective sermon images have several necessary characteristics: familiarity, relevance, simplicity, significance, sustainability, and conceptual integrity. Let's take a look at each of these characteristics. First, the image must be familiar. Effective images find the place where the text and the hearer's pre-understanding meet. This is why
Jesus used so many images from nature in his parables. The trees, animals, plants, and natural resources (such as rocks and water) were key to making life viable in first-century Palestine; the people were, therefore, intimately familiar with them.

Noted African-American preacher Delores Carpenter says that the familiar is often more powerful than the new. The new is unexplored; therefore, the depth of its meaning and its implications are not readily available. That means the preacher must do more work to bring the new alive. However, the preacher can make the new familiar by taking the time to describe the object, the situation, and the object's metaphorical connection. For example, few people who hear us preach from Sunday to Sunday understand the vulnerability of sheep. Yet that characteristic is key to a deep understanding of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Second, the image must have relevance. Relevance is more than familiarity in that it depends on the meaning one attaches to the concept and the image. Something is relevant only when we see what it has to do with us. Part of the task of the preacher is to make clear the meaning that connects the theological concept and the image. Concrete representation has another advantage. As we unpack the image in our sermon, we can help those who do not speak our theological language to learn the terms and understand the meanings of such terms as salvation, sanctification, love, grace, and the like.

I once in a sermon imaged forgiveness as a sword that is able to cut away the burden and guilt engendered by our sins. Drawing on the film *The Mission*, in which a man is so repentant of his sin that he wants to die, I was able to let a picture of sin and repentance emerge. The man eventually chooses to live and to give his life in mission to those against whom he had trespassed (he used to capture members of a tribe and sell them into slavery). He joined a mission team that had to travel through a mountainous region in Brazil to get to the tribe. As penance, the repentant man wrapped in a blanket all the tools he had used to enslave people and tied the bundle around his neck. He dragged this bundle along as the team traveled to the tribal region. (In a particularly poignant scene, a member of the tribe used his knife to cut the bundle from the man's neck, trying to help him as he stumbled, nearly plunging to his death dragging his guilt burden.) Cutting the man free of his burden was an act of forgiveness. Forgiveness is that which separates us from our sin and guilt and allows us to use our energies in productive, life-giving activity in fulfilling God's purposes for our lives. I used a large knife as an image of forgiveness, thus
making the theological concept of forgiveness tangible. The knife had the added advantage of being a simple image.

The third characteristic is simplicity. Without simplicity, sustaining the connection between the image and the concept may be difficult. Complexity may make the image too heavy for most people to carry into their lives. Preachers must always do the work of making the connection; but this should be done easily, in a paragraph or two. The goal is not a “tight fit”; rather, it is to help listeners easily recognize how the concept and image can journey together over time and through life experiences.

Even a complicated concept can be packaged in a simple image. I once was asked to preach a Good Friday sermon on Jesus’ words from the cross: “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Where is the good news in these words? I finally likened Jesus’ experience to that of a child going down a sliding board for the first time. God is like the parent standing at the end of the slide, coaxing the child to let go and trust the parent at the bottom of the slide to catch him or her. A sliding board, one of the simplest of playground apparatuses, created good news out of these words of utter despair.

Significance, the fourth characteristic, deals with the need for the image to carry a theological meaning about which the hearers care. Effective images tap into emotions, touching the deeper places of our lives. Emotion drives attention, and attention drives learning and remembering. The greater the significance of the image, the less weight the other characteristics must bear to insure its effectiveness.

Drawing on a story about my great-grandfather, Papa Charles, I once used the image of an ox to represent God. Papa Charles was a tobacco farmer who carried his harvest to market in Appomattox, Virginia, in large barrels, called “hogsheads.” These were placed on a flatbed wagon that was pulled by horses. (The horses represented us humans.)

The only way to the market from Promised Land (where Papa Charles lived) required negotiating a very steep hill. This was an impossible feat for horses. Buck was an ox that belonged to Papa Charles’s cousin. Whenever Papa Charles had to take tobacco to the auction market, he would borrow Buck. He would hitch Buck to the back of the flatbed until the wagon reached the hill, where Papa Charles would hitch Buck to the front of the wagon. Buck would go slowly, an annoyance to the proud, prancing horses that pulled the weight: they wanted to go faster than Buck could, especially on the lower part of the hill. But before they reached the top of the hill, the
strength of the horses would give out and the wagon would begin to roll back. At that moment Buck would fall on his knees and hold the load while the horses rested, regaining their strength to pull the weight of the load for the rest of the journey. God, I said, is our ox, holding the load for us when our strength and resources give out. In doing so, God not only provides us rest; God also allows us to renew our strength for the rest of the journey. All of us can easily identify with our need for God’s presence and provision in the tough places of life. The image of God as ox connected well with the hearers, because they found it significant.

The fifth characteristic is sustainability. The image must be strong enough to carry the theological point and be a sustaining thread that weaves the message together. Changing the image in mid-sermon is as dangerous as changing planes in midair. It can be done, but it requires great skill and courage (or foolhardiness) and a healthy measure of luck. If the preacher wants the image to serve as the package that carries the message into the everyday lives of the congregation, he or she should make clear what that package is and then wrap the whole sermon in it. In other words, begin with the image and continue with it through to the final thought. If it is a strain to weave the image throughout the sermon, this may be a clue that the particular image is not the correct one for the message.

I once used the image of coloring outside the lines (something we were taught in kindergarten not to do) as the package in which to wrap the sermon’s central theological point; namely, the challenge to be radically Christian. I began the sermon with words along these lines: “I am an avid comics fan. There used to be a comic strip in the Washington Post called ‘Safe Havens.’ It was set in a daycare center. I particularly remember one strip. In the first panel imagine little Matt in jail stripes behind bars, looking very sad. In the second panel visualize Matt with a saw in his hand, using it to saw through the jail bars in order to escape to the outside. Can you already see the third panel in which he gleefully leaps through the sawed bars to freedom? In the final panel we see that Matt is actually seated at a table in the daycare center coloring in a coloring book with Samantha, who says to him, ‘Hey, Matt, you’re coloring outside the lines!’ To which Matt responds joyfully: ‘Yes! And it feels GREAT!’ Matt’s joy comes from having used what he had—his imagination—to emancipate himself from the restrictions of the lines in the coloring book and the instructions to stay inside of them. He used what he had to go beyond
the restrictions on his behavior suggested by the presence of the lines. Matt chose; Matt acted. Matt appropriated an option that was only real when he chose to "act on it." The sermon goes on to identify persons, particularly women and African-Americans, who colored "outside the lines" to bring about social justice. I expanded on this point with the additional example of the way slaves forced their emancipation, thus coloring outside the lines drawn by society.

Finally I invited the congregation to identify the lines that have been drawn to keep them and other people "in" or "out." Then I helped them discern what God wants them to do; namely, grab a crayon and color away! At the end of the service, I invited each person to take a crayon as a reminder of God's call to color outside the lines. In this way both the image and its meaning were sustained throughout the sermon.

The final characteristic of a successful sermon image is conceptual integrity. Preachers must use their imaginations with integrity, making sure that the image and the corresponding concept have sufficient "fit" to carry the theological meaning without distorting biblical truth or fracturing the Christian community. The image should be in harmony with the good news of the gospel and assist in communicating the good news to those who take the message home, packaged in that image.

Conceptual integrity is not a standard that requires a perfect analogy between image and concept; however, integrity does demand that the connection be plausible. An image that has conceptual integrity illuminates the reality to which the image points. The effective image is capable of evoking those aspects of reality that are vital to its understanding and appropriation. The image can be odd, ill-fitting, or even playful, as Brueggemann suggests in discussing the usefulness of metaphors. But it should never be ludicrous or misleading.

For example, after a visit to the Wright Brothers Exhibit in Kill Devil Hills, NC, I understood how simple controlled flight is, even in the most sophisticated aircraft. As we left, I told my husband that there is a sermon in that experience. In planning for the sermon for the following week, I was surprised that the Gospel lesson was Matt. 22:34-40, in which Jesus sets forth the greatest commandment. The image of controlled flight immediately suggested itself as an apt way to illuminate this passage. Keeping our lives under the control that God desires is bi-directional: love of God and love of neighbor. Controlled flight is attained through two mechanisms, roll and pitch. The image became an airplane. The airplane is not an image for love;
its attributes cannot carry the weight of that reality. But because the flight of the airplane is controlled by two functions, it is adequate as an image of a life controlled by love: vertically in love of God and horizontally in love of neighbor.

How to Find a Good Image for the Message

We live in an image-conscious age. How can the preacher become a wordsmith who uses images effectively as a vehicle for the message? First, preachers must approach this process prayerfully; after all, it is a sacred task. It requires that they cultivate their ability to receive and perceive the moving of the Spirit. Preachers must cultivate their devotional life, allowing the Spirit to speak to them through what others have received and written. They must be still enough, focused enough, vulnerable enough to receive ideas and entertain "foolishness."

In her article, "From Exegesis to Sermon: Shifting Gears," Lucy Lind Hogan reminds the preacher that sermon preparation is a time-consuming task. Likening sermon preparation to learning to shift gears in a car, she states:

If I can return to the image of driving a standard transmission, one must learn that letting out the clutch and engaging the accelerator take time. The same is true with our sermons. If we do not allow enough time the process will stall. The process of sifting, reviewing, and choosing takes time because the final theme or direction is not always immediately obvious. . . . What is more likely to be the case is study, wrestling, choosing, rejecting that choice, making another choice, and then yet another still.17

Unless the preacher is willing to invest time in the process, the congregation will not be fed a consistent diet of effective, relevant preaching.

Time with the text is not enough, though. Preachers must spend time with the context as well. Indeed, Jorge Acevedo has discovered that context is the best place to begin:

[My new beginning place for preaching became the congregation and community I serve . . . . What were their concerns? What did
they think about God? Issues of relevancy forced their way to
the front. . . . They wanted to know how to handle or manage
pain, stress, marriage, raising children, and finances. 18

Second, preachers should recognize that the time spent in image
identification and development is time well spent. In reviewing
preaching trends, Harold Bryson notes:

One of the most noticeable trends in preaching has been the
attempt to create fresh images for preaching. It represents
trying to create pictures with words so audiences can see and
feel spiritual truths. . . . Picture preaching comes from a
preacher who engages in imagination. Some preachers attempt
to see and feel a text. They associate life experiences with the
text. When they see, feel, and associate, they describe and tell
so listeners can hear, feel, and associate life with the text. 19

Cultivating the imagination is a time-intensive effort that can bear
much fruit. Children seem to be born with imagination—just watch
them play! But too often adults seem handicapped in their ability to
employ imagination. Thomas Troeger, acknowledging the inability of
preachers to appropriate imagination, says that they should practice
the discipline of training their eyes. Troeger challenges preachers to
pay attention to what is seen in day-to-day living and to notice what
it is in our daily routines and the mass media that shapes contem­
porary understanding. 20

Michael Williams calls the imagination "our God-given ability to
create images in our mind and the minds of others drawn from past
memory or moving toward some future hope." 21 Preachers need to
reclaim the gift of imagination and use that gift to the glory of God and
for the spiritual growth of those with whom they are in ministry. If
preachers invest time in acts of imaging, images of persons and situations
related to the sermon text with which they are wrestling will emerge.

Another aspect of the use of imagination is to identify the images
already included in the text. The parables and Old Testament images I
mentioned earlier are there for the using. How can the preacher use his or
her exegesis to appropriate those images, unpack them in their scriptural
context, and then translate them into current life so that their power
becomes powerful to those living today? God shows Amos (7:7-9) a plumb
line, God's standard for right living. It is an ordinary tool used by builders
through the ages to make sure that walls are vertical. God tells Amos that God will put the Israelites to the test with God's plumb line to see if they are building lives that please God. Preaching from this text requires no additional images; the central image is already there, ready to be used. This is what I did in a sermon titled, “Living by God's Plumb Line.” I used an actual plumb line to make the image concrete; and the corresponding message reminded worshipers of the need to constantly measure their lives against God's standard of right living.

The preacher can also read the text carefully, looking for the key theological point he or she wants to focus on in the sermon. Then he or she can play the “it-is-like-a ___” game. Suppose, for example, that the sermon text is 2 Kings 5:1-15a—the story of Naaman and the little slave girl who helps him find a cure for his leprosy. Naaman's initial anger over the prophet's command to wash himself in the Jordan River may lead the preacher to focus on the fact that often we are disdainful of the small and seemingly insignificant things in our lives. Such disdain frequently keeps us from doing our part because, in comparison to the size of the problem our part seems too small, too insignificant to make a difference. What kind of image can the preacher use to convey this theological truth about our lives? By taking time to let the Holy Spirit work through the imagination, the preacher may ponder all the little things that make a real difference in the scheme of things. Think of nails or rivets, both items that we use to hold things together. Nails are familiar objects. We all know what nails are and how they work; and most of us have had some experience using them. How can the preacher appropriate the image of a nail, a seemingly insignificant, yet vital part of the construction process?

In a sermon on the story of Naaman titled, “The Little Things,” I used the image of the seemingly insignificant nail helping to accomplish great tasks. I opened the sermon with an old moral:

For want of a nail, a shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe, a horse was lost,
For want of a horse, a rider was lost,
For want of a rider, the battle was lost.

I also displayed a nail during the sermon. The idea of the “little” nail was sustained throughout the sermon by highlighting the little things: the little maid, in a little position, making a little statement. I
emphasized Elisha's little effort to heal Naaman and the little action Naaman needed to take a little journey to a little body of water. I contrasted these "little" things with three "big" things: the big impact of leprosy on Naaman's life; Naaman's big position as head of the army; and the big gift Naaman carried to the big person, the king (2 Kings 5:5b). I then tied into this theme the poem I had read at the outset of the sermon. The horseshoe is "little" in comparison with the "big" horse, and even more "little" when compared with winning the "big" battle. The image was then applied to the life situation of the worshipers through a litany of small alternatives to big needs drawn from contemporary life situations.

In closing the sermon I returned to the image of the nail by driving home the point that the seeming insignificance of our gifts and talents is no excuse for not using them in God's service. We must depend on God to make the difference that is needed. I challenged the worshipers with the question, "What are you doing with your little nail?"

Afterward, I offered each person a small nail to take home as a reminder to be attentive to the "little" opportunities for living out our commitment to God.

Familiarity, relevance, simplicity, significance, sustainability, and conceptual integrity help us create images that make our sermons plain and portable.

Conclusion

Preachers depend on the connection between the mouth (the preacher's) and the ear (the hearer's) as a vehicle for meaning. Though the preacher deals with abstract theological truths, these can be made more concrete through the word pictures the preacher creates in the hearers' minds. Many of our worship spaces are visually static. It is probably fair to say that in 95 percent of congregations the only visual change from Sunday to Sunday is a fresh vase of flowers. Many congregations, of course, change paraments, stoles, and banners, according to the season of the year. The fact remains, though, that for the most part worshipers are not required to use their eyes, except for reading.

Our contemporary culture will no longer excuse anyone—including preachers—who ignores the full complement of senses with which God has created us. And why should preachers be excused? By appealing to all the senses of our listeners we help them carry the
word of God past Sunday into their everyday lives. The sermon has made the Word plain; the Word has become portable.

Notes

10. Ibid., 18.
11. Ibid., 19.
12. Ibid., 20.
15. Ibid., 160.
The Appeal of Wisdom

September 3, 2000—Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time
Song of Sol. 2:8-13
Ps. 45:1-2, 6-9 or Ps. 72
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Song of Songs is an extended secular love poem that ancient Jewish and Christian traditions have attributed to Solomon. While it has Egyptian counterparts, and other love poems must have been composed in biblical times, it is the only example of secular love poetry from ancient Israel that has survived. The presence of Aramaic, Persian, and Mishnaic language indicates a postexilic date of around 300 BCE. In ancient canonical lists the Song of Songs is listed among the wisdom books along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Whether or not Israel's sages actually wrote these poems, it seems likely that they were responsible for preserving and transmitting them. While I haven't conducted a Gallup Poll, I suspect that the Song of Songs is not among the top ten of preachers' favorite texts. This is not because the book is violent or disturbing but because it is sensuous.

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Historically, interpreters have tried to apply the antiseptic of allegory to the book’s sensuality. Jewish interpreters have viewed the book as love poems between Yahweh and Israel or Torah. Christian interpreters have viewed it as love poems between Christ and the church, his bride, or, in medieval times, between Christ and the Virgin Mary.2

The earnest, delicate sensuality of the two young lovers of the Song of Songs cannot be allegorized away. It remains a voluptuous poem about the sexual awakening of a young woman and her lover. The two meet in an idealized landscape of fertility and abundance—a kind of Eden—where they discover the pleasures of lovemaking and the power and beauty of romantic love. That power is eloquently expressed near the end of the book (8:6b-7).

[Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.]

In the New Revised Standard Version our text from chapter 2 is given the heading “Springtime Rhapsody.” The Song is set in springtime, in the city of Jerusalem with its outlying vineyards and pastures. It is an invitation to a tryst by the male beloved to his female lover.

Throughout the collection of poems, the woman is assertive and sensuous, pursuing her lover (3:1-4; 5:6-7) and inviting him boldly (4:16; 6:11-12; 7:13; 8:2, 5). She is not acted upon as women are portrayed in the priestly genealogies and typical depictions of sexual relations. In the Song the lovers take turns inviting each other, and love is wholly reciprocal.3 Both are described in tender images (lilies, doves, gazelles) as well as forceful, stately terms (pillars, towers). The love between the two is faithful, joyful, satisfying, passionate, and mutual. In many familiar love stories, like Romeo and Juliet, love is closely tied to loss and death. For Tristan and Isolde or Heathcliff and
Catherine, love itself is a form of suffering. The lovers in the Song savor love rather than suffer from it. While the Song has similarities with Egyptian love poetry, in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures it affirms unique themes. They include the celebration of erotic love not tied to marriage or procreation and a depiction of a woman as a partner in sexual pleasure rather than one acted upon. The prominence of women in the Song, the association of women with poetry and song in the Bible, and the unusually sympathetic portrayal of a woman’s perspective on sexuality has led some readers to wonder whether the author may have been a woman.

The Song is not completely at odds with the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures in its view of sexual pleasure. Sex is no sin in the Old Testament. Sexual attraction is counted as one of the wonders of the world in Proverbs (Prov. 30:18-19). Proverbs dramatizes the perils of adultery (Prov. 7:16-18), but at the same time it recommends erotic pleasure in the context of marriage as a remedy against temptation (Prov. 5:15, 18-19). Even the melancholy Qohelet sees love as a God-given consolation for the pains of daily life (Eccles. 9:9).

Contemporary preachers misunderstand the book if they suppose its point is the casual condoning of premarital sexual relations. The Song of Songs is a poetic fantasy. Poets don’t always reflect social conventions; sometimes they ignore or subvert them. The collection’s agenda is not to deliberately defy social strictures on premarital sex but rather to accept sexuality with naturalness and delicacy.

The book’s attitude toward the lovers’ relationship is anything but casual. The book has a sexual ethic; it is not chastity but fidelity—sexual exclusiveness. The lovers embody unquestioned devotion to each other, a love that is as strong as death, a constancy that is innate to their relationship rather than a virtue they have to work at.

Having affirmed the book for its ardent, earnest affirmation of sexual love, the preacher may still be asking the question, What does this have to do with wisdom, and what themes from it will preach? It helps to view the Song of Songs in the context of other wisdom books in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The concern of the sages responsible for the wisdom literature we have in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job was the formation of character of the young in ways that would lead to personal and community harmony and order. Proverbs is filled with instructions for following...
the path of moderation in physical habits, diligence in work, self-control in speech, prudence in one’s choice of companions, respect in one’s treatment of the poor, and integrity in relationships.

These are the kinds of behaviors that make for stable families and communities. The poems of the Song of Songs offer a graphic commendation of fidelity and mutuality in love between the sexes. This is certainly an important message to the young of every generation and quite in keeping with the purposes of Israel’s wisdom instruction.

The poems depict the joys of faithful sexual communion with one’s beloved. Read in the context of the rest of the wisdom literature, these poems point to the joys of faithful communion with God. Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs is more than precepts for living a life of character. It refers to the personification of an aspect of the character of God. In Proverbs this is conveyed through the metaphor of Woman Wisdom (Prov. 1:20-33; 8:22-36; 9:1-6).

Throughout the Bible’s wisdom literature, the young are encouraged to pursue wisdom in imagery drawn from the realm of human love. Wisdom is compared to a woman who offers food to the youth (Sirach 13:2-3; Prov. 9:5) as the woman in the Song of Solomon offers food to her lover (7:13-8:2). The sages advise the youth to love and embrace wisdom (Prov. 4:6-8; Sirach 6:27). In the canonical context, the love poems of the Song of Solomon encourage youth to be faithful in their human love relationships in the framework of their faithful relationship with Wisdom herself.

The Song of Songs portrays, in a series of tender vignettes, the poignancy and pleasure of the divine gift of sexuality. If we’re lucky, we middle-aged preachers have experiences of this gift, present as well as past, that lie like smoldering embers in our awareness. The love poems of the Song of Songs wait to fan those embers into flames. They intend to instigate a gracious cycle in which sensuality and spirituality intermingle. A girl’s verse to her lover from the Egyptian love poem “The Flower Song” expresses this beautifully: “How lovely is my hour with you / This hour flows forth for me forever / it began when I lay with you. / In sorrow and in joy, you have exalted my heart. / Do not leave me.”

The Song of Songs increases our ardor in loving our human beloved. In that loving we experience the good gift of a loving God. And in our gratitude to that loving God we are energized to love our beloved. There are, of course, boundaries in preaching between

THE APPEAL OF WISDOM
appropriate self-disclosure and inappropriate self-exposure. Still, the relationship between the joys of faithful sexuality and the joys of faithful devotion to God needs to be preached about. While there is silence on this subject from the pulpit, a cultural cacophony of voices offers a superficial, violent version of a sexual education. It's a topic everyone is interested in. While they're listening, we'd better talk.

September 10, 2000—Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time
Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
Ps. 125 or Ps. 124
James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

"I never preach from Proverbs. They seem like a hodgepodge of sayings with no historical or theological context. I don't know what to do with them." This is the comment I hear quite frequently in teaching courses on preaching biblical wisdom. The proverbial lections for Year B for the September Sundays of Ordinary Time offer us an opportunity to expose this common view of Proverbs as a mistaken one. They give us the chance to reclaim three key passages from this spiritually nutritious book for the nourishment of the church in the world.

Proverbs belongs to the wisdom genre in the Hebrew Scriptures, a group of writings that focus on how to order our daily lives in habits of moderation and reverence for God. Optimism about God's willingness to reveal these patterns and our human ability to order our lives in harmonious ways prevails in Proverbs. In Job and Ecclesiastes the unspoken question is, What strengthens individuals and communities to persist in faith given the suffering of the innocent, the power of folly, and the inevitability of death? Wisdom themes also thread through several psalms (for example, 34, 37, and 49), Deuteronomy, and the Song of Songs. In the New Testament wisdom genres and themes abound. They grace the proverbial sayings of Jesus, the instruction of the Letter of James, the christological reflection of John's Gospel, and Paul's musings in 1 Corinthians on the wise folly of our gospel and our preaching.

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom sayings gathered over many centuries, probably collated in the period after the exile. Chapters 10–29 present several collections of short sayings, or
proverbs, attributed to Solomon and other sages. They come not from a single author but rather from a variety of circumstances and times in Israel's history: clan, court, and wisdom school. A prologue of nine chapters, probably written sometime after the Exile, unifies the older proverbial collections in the form of the address of Woman Wisdom, God's Wisdom Personified as a Wise Woman. Chapters 30-31 may well be later additions to the book.10

The postexilic period was a time of social instability, with traditional institutions like monarchy and Temple defunct. During this period there was a renewed focus on the home and the wisdom imparted there, not only by fathers but also by mothers. The importance of women's role in wisdom instruction and the tradition of women's roles as unofficial counselors to their husbands, homemakers, and prophets helped shape a vision of wisdom as Woman.11

Next week's lection from Prov. 1:20-33 deals more directly with this insistent, inspiring figure. This week our focus is on a couple of verses of her instruction on the topic of how the one who would be wise should treat the poor. Respect and charity for the poor are two in a constellation of qualities that shine forth in a wise person's life. The inculcation of these qualities in the young is the purpose of the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs sought to equip youth to live responsibly before God the Creator of Wisdom, contributing to the well-being of the community. Individual and community well-being, peace with justice (shalom), was the aim of the sage. Both individuals and communities need to learn strategies for achieving lives of “righteousness, justice, and equity” (Prov. 1:3). The development of moral character was not for the sake of honing skills for personal success. Rather, moral instruction served to prepare youth to benefit the larger community.12

An important incentive for living the life of wisdom was that one thereby acquired a good name. Throughout Proverbs wisdom is compared to precious metals. It always comes out favorably by comparison. “Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold” (3:13-14). Here in Proverbs 22:1, a good name, a fruit of wisdom, is said to be superior to precious metals.

The one who seeks wisdom will evince many attributes of the wise life: moderation in physical habits; industry; respect for elders; faithfulness to relationships; self-control over one's temper; and
discernment in knowing when to speak and when to be silent. This passage speaks of another key quality of the wise person: respect for and charity to the poor.

Proverbs, as oral transmissions, come from a wide variety of social settings. Some were coined by the poor in rural settings; others by the relatively well off who may have included educated scribes, skilled at poetic phrasing. The spectrum of these social locations shows through in the attitudes various proverbs promote toward the poor.

In a number of proverbs poverty is said to be the result of sloth (Prov. 10:4; 14:23; 19:15, 24; 21:5; 24:33-34), the deserved result of drunkenness and laziness. This may well represent an elitist view toward those at the bottom of the social ladder, as it does in contemporary political life. Surely this is an unfair generalization to apply to the working poor—those who, even with second jobs, make a wage that is not adequate to support their families, given the lack of affordable child care and housing in many communities in our country.

Another strand of reflection on poverty in Proverbs 10-22 is an awareness of the brutal conditions of the poor. The sages observe that poverty is an ugly situation that leaves one at the mercy of the unsympathetic whims of the rich. “The rich rule over the poor and the borrower is the slave to the lender” (Prov. 22:7). The poor often lack friends (Prov. 14:20; 19:4, 7). These proverbs could be rooted in the experience of the poor themselves, surfacing their reflections on the harshness of their daily lives.13

So far this variety of views of the poor sounds surprisingly contemporary. There is still another strand in proverbial thinking about the poor, the one represented by this text. It is one that has considerably more pulpit potential than those we’ve dealt with so far! According to this text, the poor partake of the full dignity of creation; and their mistreatment is incompatible with the pursuit of wisdom. One should not despise or mock the poor person, for this is an insult to the Creator (17:5). Proverbs 22:2 points out that the Lord is creator of both rich and poor alike. The policy of protection of the weak was one Israelite society shared with the instruction literature of Mesopotamia and Egypt. In Israel it was represented as the will of Yahweh and therefore as the duty of the king as representative of God (29:14). God maintains the borderline of a widow’s property (15:25). Anyone who abuses the rights of the widow, the orphan, and the poor acts contrary to the will of God and actively reproaches God (14:31a). Anyone who assists the weak honors God (14:31b) and will receive blessings from
the Lord (22:9; 19:17). One is forbidden to enter the property of the orphan in order to claim it as his own (23:10-11). One is not to rob the poor because of their poverty (22:22).

The abandonment of the principle of protection of the weak by kings prompted the preaching of the prophets on the issue of the oppression of the poor by the ruling elite and the coming judgment on the nation (see Isa. 1:17). The title of child-advocate Marian Wright Edelman’s book The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours expresses this prophetic truth cogently. How we treat the vulnerable is the measure of our success as individuals and as a nation.

The sages saw poverty as a reality to be acknowledged, softened by charity, and, if possible, avoided. We hear this note of advocacy of charity to the poor in Proverbs 22:9. There is in Proverbs no insistence, as we have in the prophets, that poverty has its roots in oppression by the ruling elite. There is no vision of a new order in which the poor will be vindicated (Isa. 14:30; 26:6). The message of the sages regarding the poor needs the stronger message of the prophets that a nation’s treatment of the poor is the litmus test of its obedience to God. It needs Jesus’ challenge that the rich have received their consolation and that in the kingdom of God the first shall be last.

Maybe Proverbs stops short of where we wish it had gone in its messages about poverty. Still it leaves us preachers with several strong messages to proclaim. These include the dignity of all people, regardless of their economic standing, as beloved children of our Creator God. I am reminded of the motto of the Logos children’s program, a Wednesday night educational program my children attended at our local church a few years ago. Wall posters and buttons proclaimed, “You are a child of God. I’ll treat you that way.”

Another pulpit-worthy theme is the incompatibility of wisdom with an attitude of indifference to the poor. Many people in churches today have worked hard to be financially comfortable and to be actively involved in their children’s interests. They may want good friends, good coaches, and good schools for their children. Those are blessings we should be thankful for. But neither our children nor we can receive life’s deepest blessing if the poor are not in some way a part of our lives. That certainly means praying for the poor, sharing our bread with the poor, and working for the poor in our communities. If we fail at that, we raise a generation of those whose indifference to the poor stunts the growth of their own spirits.
The Reprover: Wisdom’s First Speech (1:20-33)

In Proverbs, God’s wisdom is personified as a teacher of wisdom calling people onto the path of life. Woman Wisdom is a metaphor for the divine presence. The metaphor most likely developed during the postexilic period when male-run institutions like the Temple priesthood and the monarchy had been dissolved. Then, the locus of wisdom teaching shifted from school and court to hearth and home. Women and their teaching role in the home were an important source of stability.15

The book of Proverbs contains two speeches by Woman Wisdom to her would-be followers: 1:20-33 and 8:22-36. In this first speech She stands at the gates to the city where government and business was carried on. She is an insistent, inspiring prophetess, speaking to all, but focusing on the inexperienced, the not-yet-wise. Wisdom’s first speech is addressed to those most likely to refuse her! We soon find out that the youth to whom she speaks has a history of ignoring her instruction (1:24-31). Her tone is harsh and matter-of-fact, with no sugarcoating.

As parents we have all said, when no one seems to be listening: “Do you think I am talking for my health?” Our text depicts a speaker offering life-giving advice, not for her own health but for the health of those who should be but are not listening. While Wisdom does not threaten her hearers with any punishment beyond the consequences of their own foolish choices, she clearly will lose no sleep at the prospect of their receiving their just deserts (1:32). She will laugh when inevitable disaster descends (vv. 26-27) and will simply not be present (v. 28). She ends her address by contrasting the end of the foolish with that of those who heed her warnings and embrace her teachings: “[T]hose who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster” (v. 33).

This first speech is weighted toward reproof. Verses 20-32 consist of warning and scolding, with one concluding phrase of reassurance.
This is in contrast to Woman Wisdom's second speech, which is weighted toward reassurance. It contains nine verses about Wisdom's role in creation and her rejoicing in the world and the human race, three verses about the benefits of following her and one concluding verse of warning about the consequences of those who do not listen and follow. "[T]hose who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death" (8:36). Woman Wisdom sets a good example for us contemporary preachers. She adjusts the emphasis of her sermons to the needs of her congregations, whether prophetic reproof or pastoral encouragement and reassurance.

Woman Wisdom knows the retailer's dictum "location is everything." She stands in the streets, the square, at the busiest corner, at the entrance of the city gates, calling the young to enter onto her way of life. This first speech emphasizes the perils of not entering upon her way, rather than the benefits of following her. We learn about those benefits throughout the rest of the book of Proverbs. Woman Wisdom promises that those who fear God (who revere God as the source of moral knowledge) live moderately, work hard, and honor the poor. Such people will gain health and life and the satisfaction of contributing to the harmony of the community (Prov. 3:13-18; 8:32-36).

Wisdom in the book of Proverbs is often described as "the way" (derek, Prov. 4:11), as it also is in several Eastern faith systems. The Way is an apt title for wisdom, because wisdom paves a path under our feet for how to live in harmony with divine order, for how to live life as God intended us to live it. By no coincidence in the early days of the church, Christians were described as "followers of the Way."

So Wisdom stands at the mall, the movie theater, the grocery store, the town hall, calling the young into her way of life. Her placement speaks volumes about God's desire to reveal patterns of orderly living in the realms of creation and human relationships. While Job and Ecclesiastes depict a concealing God, Proverbs emphasizes that God is a revealing God, offering wisdom precepts for the one who diligently seeks the divine presence. The book of Proverbs is filled with images of Wisdom seeking and calling followers (see 1:20-33; 8:22-36). The substance of her injunctions is that the wise person searches diligently for that by which he has already been found (Prov. 3:13-18). In the Wisdom literature, the image of waiting at the gates is applied to both wise person and Wisdom herself: "Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my..."
doors" (Prov. 8:34). In the Wisdom of Solomon we find that "Wisdom hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. He who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for he will find her sitting at his gates... She goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought" (Wisd. of Sol. 6:13-16).

We have all received invitations to parties or dinners or receptions or weddings that include in small letters at the bottom a phone number and date by which to respond—an RSVP. We have all at times put these invitations aside, burying them under a pile of bills and junk mail and rediscovering them after the party is over. This passage is very clear that the invitation to respond to God’s Wisdom has an RSVP deadline. I am reminded of the contemporary proverb “Not to decide is to decide.”

A motif of the Hebrew Scriptures’ wisdom traditions that became prominent in apocalyptic literature is relevant at this point. That motif is the rejection of wisdom and her withdrawal to heaven as an event that would signal the last times.

Wisdom went forth to make her dwelling among the children of men,
And found no dwelling-place:
Wisdom returned to her place,
And took her seat among the angels. (Enoch 42:1-2)

There she will be sought by many and not found. (4 Ezra 5:10)

These passages imply that there will be a time when the party is over and it will be too late to RSVP.

This theme of an RSVP deadline sounds also in Jesus’ teachings. He presented his teachings in the form of proverbial wisdom and was viewed by many early Christians after his resurrection as having been Wisdom-in-Person. Others saw him as the judging Son of Man of apocalyptic expectation. We are warned in Mark’s Gospel that those who reject him and his subversive wisdom teachings now will be rejected by him when he returns to judge the earth as Son of Man (Mark 8:27-38).

Preaching on this passage gives the preacher an opportunity to deal with themes of the benefits of living by the Way of Wisdom, which is the ongoing work of a lifetime. It also sounds the theme of our urgent
need to make that daily choice. As country singer Clint Black croons to us in one of my favorite country songs, there is "No Time to Kill."

September 24, 2000—Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
Proverbs 31:10-31
Ps. 1
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

This last portion of the book of Proverbs is often called "A Poem to a Woman of Worth," literally a "woman of strength" (esēt hayil, 31:10). The traditional interpretation of this poem is that it describes the ideal, or capable, wife. This is the woman the wise young man should choose to enhance his future, the "good wife" celebrated in 12:4 as the "crown of her husband."

It may be that we have here a portrait of what the ancients considered the perfect woman. The image of the feminine ideal was cross-cultural. She had dignity; she was also pious, energetic, thrifty, a capable manager, charitable, skilled at the loom, and a feast for the eyes. Her hands are always busy, never still, seeking wool and flax, bringing food, planting a vineyard, spinning cloth, helping the needy, sewing garments for her household. Today, even with laborsaving devices, women, in the home and beyond it, have more to do than they have hours in each day. In preaching this traditional interpretation we might urge the women of our congregations to strive to be more like the Woman of Worth. But I'm not sure we'd be doing them any favors.

In the movie Iron Will, based on a true story that happened during World War I, seventeen-year-old Will, after the death of his father, enters a dogsled race to earn enough money to keep his family's farm. He was the youngest racer, up against men in the prime of their strength with far more experience than he had. Just before he begins the race his trainer, an elderly Eskimo man, gives him this advice: "You are young. You are tender. The only way you can win is this, 'run longer, sleep less than the others.' You remember these words in the middle of the night, racing under the cruel moon." That's how our culture tells us how we become people of worth today: "Run longer, sleep less." That goes for men as well as women, youth as well as adults.

Across lines of economics and class, the rules of worth for women...
are still, "Be thin, be beautiful, and don't age." This biblical super-wife seems like just one more unattainable ideal for contemporary women. As one who, as I write, has dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and unmade beds, I find this woman of worth somewhat intimidating! It was with great relief that I discovered that recent scholarship perceives another level of interpretation in this passage.

These scholars point out that the capabilities of this woman are so incredible that we have to question whether she is really an ideal put forward for imitation by other women. No woman of ancient Israel held such a high place in family, society, or economy as the poem imagines. No woman held such authority or was granted such authority, even as the ideal. A woman was not generally viewed as the source of her husband's honor; rather the reverse.

Another clue that the poem may not allude to an ideal earthly woman is the uncanny resemblance between this woman and Woman Wisdom herself as we have encountered her in the first 30 chapters of Proverbs. Both are said to shed light on the way of those who follow her (cf. 31:18b and 13:9); and both are said to be worth more than precious jewels (cf. 31:10b and 3:15; 8:11; 16:16). Both bring prosperity, protection, and honor upon those who trust in them (cf. 4:6, 8, 9 and 31:11, 12).

Both Woman Wisdom and the woman of worth laugh at the future (cf. 1:26 and 31:25). Both Woman Wisdom and the woman of worth, whether by advice or example, teach us to fear the Lord. Throughout Proverbs we have been told that the fear of the Lord, reverence for God as the source of moral knowledge, is the beginning of wisdom (1:7; 9:10; 15:33). The woman of worth is described as "a woman who fears the Lord."

The honor lavished on this woman by her husband and children comes not from her marriage to him but from the wisdom inherent in her character. She possesses many of the traits of the wise person depicted in the collected sayings of Proverbs (Prov. 10–29). She labors with discipline and diligence; she cares for the poor; she looks to tomorrow's needs with forethought; she is strong and dignified. Her providential care for her household makes the future a carefree adventure. When she speaks, it is in words of wisdom.

Recent scholarship agrees that the uncanny resemblance between the woman of worth and Woman Wisdom is no coincidence. This woman of worth is Woman Wisdom herself. This concluding poem of the book of Proverbs summarizes Wisdom's qualities and commends...
them to would-be followers. It is an indirect invitation to the young to become members of the Household of Wisdom, honoring her presence in our lives and partaking of her benefits.

Using this interpretation, the preacher can deliver a message of grace rather than guilt for both women and men. The example and invitation of Wisdom to become members of her household can energize us in our family relationships: marital and parental and those relating to our extended families. None of us can be this perfect person, but all of us can allow ourselves to be found by a Wisdom who waits at our gate and meets us in every path. Her good qualities become not standards we have to match but gracious resources for us as spouses, parents, friends, and children.

Throughout Proverbs we are told that we must seek wisdom to find it. We are also told that Wisdom is a gift. This is the paradox of God's grace and human response. They belong together. This concluding poem is a reminder that Wisdom is a gift, a gracious invitation to enter a loving, orderly household where we will be both nurtured and challenged in our lifelong pursuit of wisdom (see Prov. 9:1-6).

There is an unconditional quality to this invitation. It is offered to all; it's just that not all accept it. Novelist Anna Quindlen in a public television interview with Charlie Rose several years ago recalled the unconditional love her mother showed her and her brothers and sisters. “With my mother, you didn’t have to tap dance, or win prizes to earn her love. She just thought that we were the most marvelous beings that ever dropped onto the face of the earth. My mother was the one true thing in my life, the foundation, the bedrock, that which could be trusted.” The woman of worth is a compelling, comforting metaphor for an aspect of the character of God. She embodies divine light, care, food, shelter, persistence in caring for our needs, wisdom, and charity. In embodying all these qualities and actions, woman wisdom embraces us and provides us with a home environment in which we can embody them for the world. She is our life’s one true thing.
Notes

4. Ibid., 7.
5. Ibid., 20-21.
6. Ibid., 11-12.
8. Ibid, 315.
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