

Book Review – “Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African-American Experience”

“Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African-American Experience” by JoAnne Marie Terrell (Orbis Books, 1998) is an exposition of the development of a womanist theologian (Terrell herself) through a historical exploration of the meaning of the Cross and the Atonement. Terrell’s definition of a womanist theologian is a theologian who is a woman of color. This distinguishes the womanist from the feminist, usually represented as a white, middle to upper middle class woman, and the black theologian who was/is an African American male theologian doing theology from the perspective of the Civil Rights movement of the sixties with a strong androcentric bias.

Terrell cites two main goals of her study:

1. “to survey the works of black theologians and discuss the liberative import they found in the gospel that enabled them to remain both black and Christian”
2. “to discern theological dimensions of theodicy found in the interplay between gender and race.”

She divides the book into five parts. The first part, “The Refiner’s Fire,” is a comparison of African slavery and Christian martyrdom in the early centuries of the church. Terrell says that “although he [Jesus] was crucified for sedition, to his first interpreters Jesus’ death involved his own agency and contributed to their development of a hermeneutic of sacrifice, which is ensconced in the Bible and Christian tradition and which has a historical corollary in an ethic of love – seen as the very heart of Christian morality – in the

African American community." Terrell states that martyrdom as it was translated into a hermeneutic of sacrifice in the tradition of the church was used to justify African slavery and used by the Africans to sacralize their suffering and "situate themselves within the cosmic drama as victims-becoming-victors."

The second part, "There is a Fountain", reflects on the sources for theology about the cross in the Black Church and in womanist theology. Terrell explores how the African slaves absorbed Christianity, forced on them by slaveholders and heard in the evangelical fervor of the first and second Great Awakenings, that freed them spiritually and yet also kept them in line in the ante-bellum South. Terrell cites that as the Black Church grew and developed, the paternalism of the slaveholding church was absorbed into the Black Church so that Black women continued to be the oppressed within the oppressed.

The third part, "The Scandal of the Cross," highlights three black theologians (Martin Luther King, Albert B. Cleage Jr. and James H. Cone) who pushed for reconciliation, nationhood and liberation in Black christology. King, through his non-violent protests, helped the African American community move forward through orthodox Christian means. "The pacifism that agape bespoke was the way to confront earthly powers and to mediate the real presence of Christ sacramentally." Cleage, in a less orthodox Christian way, pursued the issue of Nationhood among Blacks. "Cleage and other nationalists came to question also the spiritual freedom or salvation putatively found in the rhetoric and tenets of evangelical faith that undergirded King and the masses who followed him." Cone carried the theology another step beyond non-violent protests and Marxian economic power. He emphasized the somebodiness of the African American, the ontological liberation that the Christian message offers.

Part four, "Rethinking Sacrifice," focuses on three womanist

theologians (Jacquelyn Grant, Kelly Brown Douglas and Delores Williams) who have begun to define womanist christology. Grant's position sets Jesus as "divine co-sufferer" who "was born, lived, struggled and died among the poor [and] was an affirmation that his ultimate victory is theirs to appropriate." Terrell portrays Brown Douglas as a liberationist who dismisses the hermeneutic of sacrifice as it was used to bind the Africans to their slave masters through its individualistic conversion emphasis. Terrell says, "in my and Douglas's liberationist perspective, the cross is not taken up apart from what the rest of the story affirms; namely, that Jesus was God incarnate, who lived, struggled and died in suffering solidarity with society's victims." The last womanist Terrell cites is Delores Williams who "matches the theme of black women's surrogacy to traditional views of the Atonement, which cite Jesus' death as a vicarious sacrifice for the sake of sinful humankind." Williams enumerates the surrogate position black women were forced into during slavery:

1. generators of a steady supply of slaves,
2. gratification of slave master's sexual desires
3. wet nurses for white babies.

She "cites the synoptic gospels as scriptural warrant for fleshing out the content of a ministerial vision, proffered in the life of Jesus, which allows black women to see that their redemption does not depend upon any form of surrogacy but upon their participation in Jesus' vision."

The last part, "Our Mother's Gardens," looks back on other sources for reflection from black women's experience with an eye to the future of African-American women as Christians. Terrell talks about her own mother's short and tragic life as redemptive as long as she is remembered and the lessons of her life are utilized for the development of the lives of other black women.

Terrell also quotes Alice Walker from "The Color Purple" and emphasizes that black women must be willing to look at their lives and the lives of their mothers and grandmothers to learn deep lessons and heal deep wounds. She says, "Building on Abelard's insight that Christ's example teaches and saves us, I believe that anyone's death has salvific significance if we learn continuously from the life that preceded it."

To begin wrestling with Terrell's perspectives and their possible impact on the church, one paragraph from Albert Cleage that she quotes is, I believe, significant: "No actual power was needed to perpetuate the Black man's enslavement. Everything that could be done to liberate the Black man had already been accomplished at Calvary two thousand years ago. The Black man needed to do nothing himself except accept his lot and be washed in the blood of the Lamb and be made white like snow (in preparation for the life to come). So, then, if you are Black you can be poverty-stricken, you can be brutalized, and you can still be saved. Your children can be discriminated against and denied a decent education, and you can still be saved. You can live in a neighborhood from which all decencies of life have been taken and you're still saved. It was this kind of primitive Christianity which Black slaves received from their White slave masters."

The theology in this paragraph points to one of the main issues Terrell struggles with – the old debate between Anselm and Abelard. If reliance on Jesus as atoning sacrifice somehow leads to or at least allows such egregious injustice as the slave industry in the South to occur, turning to Jesus as exemplar may look like a much more humane/godly theology. If liberation on Calvary, being washed in the blood of the Lamb, saved, regardless of the circumstances, because of what Christ did for us does not eliminate racism, can even be used to justify it, why should we hold onto it?

Nonetheless, I wonder if Jesus as exemplar will offer a truly better alternative. Another quote from Delores Williams that Terrell uses is from the "Reimagining Jesus" workshop at the controversial Reimagining Conference in 1993. In response to the question "What is to be our theory of the Atonement?" Williams replied: "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff. I think we really need to see the sustaining, the sustenance images, the faith that we are to have. The fish and loaves, the candles we are to light, that our light will so shine before people so that we can remember that this message that Jesus brought, I think, is about life, and it's about the only two commandments that Jesus gave; about love."

Terrell follows this with her own version of this Abelardian perspective: "the cross, in its original sense, embodied a scandal, that something, anything, good could come out of such an event. Seen in this light, Jesus' sacrificial act was not the objective. Rather, it was the tragic, if foreseeable, result of his confrontation with evil. This bespeaks a view of Jesus and the martyrs as empowered, sacramental, witnesses, not as victims who passively acquiesced to evil." Jesus confronts evil, but as Terrell develops her argument, the possibility that Jesus is also confronting God's outrage at human sinfulness is nowhere to be found.

Though Terrell does an admirable job fulfilling her first goal, surveying the work of black theologians, I don't believe she reaches her second goal, discerning theological dimensions of theodicy in the interplay between race and gender. Her implicit assumption that God could never be a problem to us, throws the whole discussion into the realm of the human to human problem without even acknowledging the possibility of a God to human problem. And if there is no God to human problem, then there is really no need for Jesus at all, whether as atoning sacrifice or

exemplar. Human examples of people who work for justice and peace abound – certainly there are ones closer to home that take less cultural translation to utilize than Jesus.

As a discipline such as womanist theology is developing, people need room to explore previously unexplored territory; they need room to find their voices. This book by Terrell offers important insights into age-old problems that Christianity has had to address throughout its history. How do we respond when God's greatest gift to humanity, justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, is twisted to hold certain people and nations in bondage for the political, economic, and cultural advantage of another group? I know that my pastoral and theological work will continue to be informed by her efforts in this book.

However, I believe that throwing out the promise of the Gospel (through Christ God changes us, makes us new creatures) is not the answer to her questions. We need the strength and courage of having been made new in Christ to do the work of untangling the Gospel from the atrocities with which it has been intertwined so that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed, Good News.

I was at the Reimagining Conference in 1993, heard Delores Williams in the "Reimagining Jesus" workshop and sat with the assembly for the opening service. We were asked to say out loud any name for God that we wanted to use. We were sitting at round tables of ten and as women began to speak, some near me, some at the central microphone, I realized that nobody I could hear, except me, was saying Jesus. Somehow, the liberty of using taboo terms precluded using the one term that, in my opinion, had brought all of us together in the first place.

Christians will continue to explore who Jesus is and what he means for us. Though I don't agree with Terrell's conclusions, I appreciate having been asked along on part of her journey.

