

Monica Coleman

Process Thought and Womanist Theology

Summary by Max Johnson

On April 29, 2003, Monica Coleman presented a paper on "Process Thought and Womanist Theology." Coleman is a Ph.D. candidate at Claremont Graduate University and part of the ministerial staff at African Methodist Episcopal Churches in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and Nashville, Tennessee. She is also the Atlanta Outpost Convener for Process and Faith.

Coleman began by lamenting the general lack of interest in process thought among black theologians, despite the fact that process theology and black theology actually have much in common. According to Coleman, the reason behind this lack of interest is the widely held perception that process theology does not address the social, cultural, and spiritual needs of the black community. This perception has led to the wide-scale rejection of process theology in the black church, and as a result there is today only a small handful of process theologians of color. Coleman believes that this rejection was premature. "The conversation [between process and black theology] had already ended," she pointed out, "before womanist theology was able to offer *its* input."

Coleman argues that womanist theology "suggests a different dialogue" with process thought, compared with most other forms of black theology, a dialogue that could lead to the mutual transformation of both.

"Womanism" is the overarching term used to refer to those writings that reflect the unique experiences of women of color, particularly women of African descent. Coleman emphasized throughout the presentation that "the experience of black women" was the starting point for almost all womanist thought. Quoting from the work of a prominent womanist anthropologist-theologian, Coleman defined womanism as "critical reflection upon the black woman's place in the world that God has created. It takes seriously black women's experience as human beings who are made in the image of God. It [also]

affirms and critiques both the positive and the negative attributes of the church."

Womanism can be understood as a type of feminism, but unlike some forms of feminist thought, womanism is strongly pro-church, pro-family, and pro-male.

According to Coleman, womanist *theology* is a response to sexism in black theology and to racism in feminist theology. "When black theologians spoke of the 'black experience,' they only included the experiences of black men and boys," she said. In a similar vein, she pointed out, "Feminists...unwittingly spoke only of *white* women's experiences....[T]hey did not include issues of race and economics in their critiques."

Womanist theology makes extensive use of black women's experience as expressed through literature, particularly fiction. Since process thought also places an emphasis on the primacy of experience, Coleman argued it could greatly benefit from following along the same path, incorporating literature as "data for its speculative philosophical theology." Coleman argues that, although process theology has made much use of insights from science, philosophy and psychology, it has greatly "underused" the valuable resource of literature in general, and black women's literature in particular.

After presenting a concise introduction to Whiteheadian process thought, Coleman went on to suggest that a "wedding," focusing on the process emphasis on science and philosophy plus the womanist emphasis on history and literature, could revive the stalled conversation between black and process theologies. The result could be a vibrant, relevant, "womanist process theology."

Surprisingly, of the various types of black women's literature, Coleman sees "womanist science fiction" as providing excellent "source data" for this wedding. This genre includes the work of authors like Octavia Butler (*Wild Seed*, *Parable of the Tal-*



ents, *Kindred*), Tanarive Due (*The Living Blood*), and Nalo Hopkinson (*Skin Folk*). Although this rich body of literature is often overlooked even by most womanist theologians, Coleman believes that science fiction is perhaps the ultimate arena for people of color to explore a variety of social, cultural, religious, and political issues. This is because it provides “just enough distance” for an objective look at issues like racism, sexism, and classism.

Coleman then discussed some of the common characteristics of womanist science fiction, including the use of “magical realism” and “speculative time travel into the past.” But rather than *focusing* on the past, black women’s science fiction focuses on a vision of the *future*. “It critiques [contemporary] society, and offers proposals for what could be, should be, and possibly, what *will* be,” she said. “Black women’s science fiction is much more like prophecy than history.” Coleman pointed out that many of the major themes in womanist science fiction, including a concern with issues of social justice and the seeking of novel possibilities, should resonate deeply with process theologians. She emphasized that

author Octavia Butler, for example, “deftly weaves together the experience of urban decay, race, gender, science, imagination, the natural world, theology, survival, evolution and hope...[thus] simultaneously [incorporating] the sentiments of two groups of theologians: womanist theology *and* process theology.” Coleman read a passage from Butler’s novel, *Parable of the Sower*, to further illustrate her point: “All that you touch, you change,” says the novel’s protagonist, a young black woman wise beyond her years. “All that you change changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change.”

Coleman went on to say that, although most western black women were raised within the Christian tradition, much womanist science fiction actually draws from various forms of traditional *African* spirituality. According to Coleman, African religion in general has much affinity with process thought, especially its emphasis on community, and its understanding of the relational, fully interdependent nature of reality.

Coleman concluded by reiterating that process theology, a field that has for the most part been dominated by white men, could be greatly enriched by an encounter with womanist science fiction. Among other things, Coleman believes that such an encounter will “expand the circle for religious pluralism, and provide a source of hope missing from many process theologies.”



James Poling

Pastoral Care in a Time of Global Market Capitalism

Summary by John Sweeney

On June 18, 2003, Dr. James Poling, Professor of Pastoral Care, Counseling, and Theology at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, gave a seminar focused around his new book, *Render Unto God: Economic Vulnerability, Family Violence, and Pastoral Theology*.

In this book, Poling brings together a number of his long-standing interests. These interests include expanding the definition and scope of pastoral care to include socio-economic factors, how people deal with violence (including economic violence), and the role of faith in the lives of people in difficult, perhaps hopeless, situations.

An ongoing project of Poling’s has been to define pastoral theology and to argue for its inclusion as part of theology proper. Among the descriptions of pastoral theology, according to Poling, are: (a) the theory & practice of congregational care, (b) caring for families, ever-increasing communities, and eventually the world; and (c) “the study of the micro-world of intrapsychic and interpersonal interactions with the tools of theology and the social sciences for the purposes of support and healing.” Poling suggests that part of the job of pastoral theology is to interact with real congregations and real people, in real-life situations. In resisting the temptation to do pastoral care in isolation from social contexts, Poling wants pastoral care to be actively involved in the socio-economic and social contexts in which life occurs.



Pastoral care services for the economically vulnerable are rare, and pastoral care tends to underestimate the economic realities while giving disempowering advice. Poling’s own work in the counseling of persons involved in domestic violence, especially of perpetrators, has yielded a surprising amount of bad advice from

the clergy to those involved in domestic violence—advice ranging from “stand by your man—no matter what,” to the subtler, “do you still love him?” Love is not the issue—staying alive and out of harm’s way is the more important issue for those trapped in abusive relationships. Asking about “love”