Introduction to "A Womanist Looks at the Future Direction of Theological Discourse"

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"Stop the violence" is a typical refrain heard across the United States in response to the high incidence of gun violence that has plagued the nation, most notably in schools. Often ignored, however, is the unremitting violence that threatens the well-being and lives of black and brown people every day. This is the violence of white supremacy. A white supremacist narrative was central to the nation's founding identity and continues to shape the nation's collective consciousness. This narrative promotes the superiority of whiteness by characteristically negating the humanity of certain peoples, most notably those deemed nonwhite. As such it is inherently violent. Any ideology or system of thought that objectifies or demeans another human being is violent. Moreover, such a system of thought inevitably initiates a cycle of violence. Such is the case with white supremacy as it disproportionately traps black and brown bodies in a violent cycle. This is a cycle defined by poverty, mass incarceration, and death. The point of the matter is, our nation, if not the world, is saturated with a violent narrative of white supremacy that violates the sacred humanity and devalues the life of women, men, and children of color. This brings us to the future significance of theology, particularly Christian theology.

Christianity's central symbol, the cross, reflects the depth and scope of human violence. It points to a world that is steeped in violence. Through Jesus, God enters into this world of violence and yet is not compromised by it. Indeed, God triumphs over the violence of the cross—the violence of the world—in a nonviolent, life-affirming

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way. Specifically, through the resurrection God affirms the utter inviolability of human life.

Essentially, the crucifixion-resurrection event reflects the justice of God. For God's justice is nothing less than a defeat of all that betrays the sacred dignity and life of any human being. Furthermore, it matters that Jesus was crucified. His crucifixion indicates God's unwavering solidarity with the crucified peoples of the world, making it unmistakably clear that these lives matter to God. Even more, the crucified Jesus' resurrection reveals that it is only when the sacred dignity of those whose lives are most beset by crucifying violence is restored, that the justice of God can be realized. What does all of this mean for doing theology in our twenty-first century world?

Any theological discourse that takes seriously the crucifixion-resurrection event must partner with God to mend the world of crucifying violence, such as white supremacy. It should provide, therefore, an actual counter-narrative to disrupt the white supremacist narrative. Doing so begins with forthrightly naming white supremacy as a crucifying reality that stands in opposition to God's justice. It must also make clear Jesus' utter solidarity with crucified classes of people, thereby, boldly proclaiming that black and brown lives *are* sacred—they absolutely matter to God. At the same time, this theology must work to dismantle the systems and structures that foster violent realities such as poverty and mass incarceration, which again disproportionately impact people of color. Put simply, any theology today that does not confront the cycle of violence perpetuated by white supremacy betrays the God of the crucified Jesus.

And so, how has my mind changed when considering the future of theological discourse? Almost twenty-five years ago I wrote that I was compelled to become a theologian because of a vow that I made to my seven-year-old self to one day "rescue" a little black boy from a "poverty-stricken life."

Thus, the words I wrote long ago continue to ring true: "The inhumane and life-denying circumstances that shape the lives of many of God's people demand that theology be done so that it advances life, freedom and dignity for all persons." The future of theological discourse rests on answering God's call to stop the violence.

A Womanist Looks at the Future Direction of Theological Discourse

Kelly Brown Douglas*

When I was about seven years old I remember riding through the inner city of Dayton, Ohio with my parents. It was a rainy evening. I looked out the window of the car and noticed a little boy coming across the street. He was dirty and not properly dressed for the weather. To my seven-year-old eye he looked as if he might be hungry. He certainly looked poor. I cried at the thought of how he had to live. In the midst of my tears I made a vow to one day come back and rescue him from what I believed to be a "poverty-stricken" life. I now do not know if that incident was a dream or reality, but the impact on me, in either case, was the same. From that moment on I was committed to making life better for African American children who had to negotiate a life in the midst of utter poverty.

Today, the African American community—girls and boys, women and men—are caught in a spiral of death and brokenness. They are too often succumbing to the crime, drugs, disease, lack of life and freedom-producing values, which an "interlocking system" of multiple oppression—that is racism, sexism, poverty and heterosexism—breeds.[1] It is because of the vow that I made to myself at seven years old, and the crisis that currently engulfs the African American community, that I am compelled to contemplate the future direction of theological discourse.

The inhumane and life-denying circumstances that shape the lives of many of God's people demand that theology be done so that it advances life, freedom and dignity for all persons. In the very least, our theologies must enunciate the presence and challenges of the sustaining and liberating God of Jesus Christ. With particular reference

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[1] The term "interlocking oppression" to describe specifically the nature of African American women's oppression is taken from sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, in her text *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 44.

to womanist theology this paper will explore the implications of doing a theology which fosters life and liberation for those who suffer under the yoke of dehumanizing oppression.

An Incarnational Approach

Christian theology is typically characterized by the way Jesus' significance as Christ is interpreted. For far too long in the dominant theological tradition, Jesus' meaning has been understood in such a way that theologians could ignore human oppression. Such an understanding is reflective of what I refer to as an incarnational approach.

The incarnational approach seeks a strictly Christological understanding of Jesus. It discerns both "his relationship to God" and "his representative character as a human being."[2] The Chalcedon formulation (A.D. 451) exemplifies the incarnational approach. Participants at Chalcedon debated whether—as the Docetist argued—Jesus was divine, but not human; or—as the Ebionites argued—he was human, but not divine. The Chalcedon council concluded that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human.

After establishing Jesus' place in the Godhead, the key statement from the Chalcedon confession focuses on God's act of becoming incarnate. The confession reads:

> We believe in one God. Father, Ruler of all, Maker of heaven and earth. . . .
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> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages . . . who for us humans and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin and became human; and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and rose on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. . . .[3]

This focus on God descending from heaven and becoming human is the defining characteristic of the incarnational approach. This approach has often been designated as a Christology "from above"

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[2] Richard A. Norris, trans. and ed., *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), p. 2.

[3] Translation taken from Norris, *Christological Controversy*, p. 157.

because it concentrates on God's descent from heaven to earth. God is the active agent in this approach. While this particular approach has several implications for human salvation and the meaning of Jesus, the following are particularly germane in determining Christian theology's relationship to human oppression.

First, by focusing on God's act the incarnational approach diminishes the significance of Jesus' actions on earth. His ministry is virtually ignored. The Chalcedon confession, for instance, moves directly from the act of the incarnation to the crucifixion and resurrection. What Jesus did on earth, his ministry to the oppressed, has little if anything to do with his being nailed to the cross. Instead, the crucifixion and resurrection are seen as a result of what God did when God entered the world through Jesus. Walter Kasper says this of "incarnation-oriented" Christology:

> The death of Jesus is . . . merely the completion of the incarnation. The resurrection is no more than the confirmation of the divine nature.[4]

This then implies that what took place between Jesus' birth and resurrection is unconnected to what it means for Jesus to be the divine/human encounter. All that matters is that God entered the world through him. If Jesus did not conduct a liberating ministry this would not seriously affect what it meant for him to be Christ. Jesus' ministry becomes incidental to who he is. Consequently, if it is not essential to what it meant for him to be Christ, it is not essential for what it means to be a Christian.

The incarnational approach does not necessitate, therefore, that Christian theology highlight Jesus' ministry as a standard for a Christian's response to injustice. This approach allows for theologians to remain silent concerning social issues and, therefore, tacitly if not directly support systems of human oppression.

Indeed, the incarnational approach is implicated in the version of Christianity that maintained the chattel slave system. Because Jesus' ministry is ignored his responses to injustice and treatment of the downtrodden and oppressed do not become a criterion for Christian behavior. The emphasis is placed on God's act in Jesus (that is on a metaphysical happening) not on human actions in response to

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[4] Walter Kasper, *Jesus The Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 37.

Jesus' ministry. The Christian is at best called upon to believe that God did something special in Jesus, but has no obligation to treat the oppressed the way Jesus treated them. This meant that the slaveholder was free to be a good Christian and at the same time a cruel slaveholder. Christianity and one of the crudest human offenses were able to co-exist peaceably. Frederick Douglass forcefully captured this hypocrisy when he observed:

> The slave auctioneer's bell and the churchgoing bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heartbroken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time . . . [5]

The incarnational approach also undergirds the belief, particularly present amongst Southern White clergy during the 1960s Civil Rights struggles, that a minister's role is to "save souls, and not to become involved in controversial social justice issues." Referring to the Chalcedonian confession Jon Sobrino aptly explains:

> . . . God is presented in terms of epiphany rather than in the Biblical terms of being at work in the world. The Chalcedonian formula does not make it clear that God is at work . . . in the struggle for justice and the expectations of hope.[6]

An incarnational approach to understanding Jesus, that is an approach that abstracts Jesus from his "struggle for justice" in the world, has permitted to flourish the kind of theology which says nothing about the poor and oppressed. This type of theology serves as a sacred canopy for an unjust, dehumanizing status-quo. Its silence in regard to systemic oppression signals consent. More specifically,

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[5] Frederick Douglass, "Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ," in *Afro-American Religious History,* Milton Sernett, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), pp. 205–206.

[6] Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 4.

incarnational-oriented theology enables Christianity to co-exist comfortably with the systems that stifle life for African American girls and boys.

A Liberation Approach

Fortunately, Christianity and its theology does not have to be constrained to such an ignominious future. There is another way to discern Jesus' significance: the liberation approach.

The liberation approach seeks to understand Jesus through his liberating ministry to the oppressed. This approach does not ignore Jesus' relationship to God. It does not deny his divinity. Yet it concentrates on his relationship to humanity. Jesus' sermon to his hometown of Nazareth, which the Lukan gospel presents as the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, epitomizes the liberation approach. The sermon reads:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.[7]

This passage immediately points to the importance of Jesus' ministry to the oppressed. Jesus says that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, not because of what happened at the time of his birth, but because of what he has been called to do in the world. His divine nature is linked to his liberating ministry to the "poor," "the captives," the "blind," and "the oppressed." The fact that God entered human history through Jesus is not sufficient in the liberation approach. Instead, Jesus must act in history on behalf of the oppressed. According to the liberation approach, that Jesus was "Christ" means that he was a liberator of the oppressed.

This focus on Jesus' liberating ministry has significant implications for Christian theology and its relationship to human oppression. This theology can no longer remain silent in the face of injustice. It is compelled to make a meaningful response to unjust, dehumanizing conditions. Moreover, if liberating actions were crucial to what

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[7] Luke 4:18–19 RSV.

it meant for Jesus to be Christ, then they are also essential in what it means to be a Christian. The liberation approach provides impetus for Christians to rebel against an oppressive socio-economic system.

Indeed, this approach allowed enslaved African females to affirm the presence of God in their efforts to promote life and wholeness for themselves and their families. There is perhaps no more poignant witness to this than Sojourner Truth's powerful testimony after losing thirteen children to the slave system: "I cried out my mother's grief and none but Jesus heard me!"[8]

This approach also propelled Martin Luther King, Jr. into the 1960s Civil Rights movement. In fact, King often referred to Jesus' Nazareth sermon. For him, Jesus' words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. . . . " were central to understanding the demands of the Christian Gospel. He said these words illustrated that "Christianity is itself a protest."[9]

A liberation approach to understanding Jesus rescues Christianity and its theology from sanctioning an unjust status quo. Specifically, concentrating on Jesus' liberating activity forces Christian theology to clarify the incompatibility between Christianity and the conditions which breed African American genocide. Left to be determined is what such a theology would look like.

The Challenges of Womanist Theology

African American women have recently given expression to a theology indicative of a liberation approach to understanding Jesus. This theology—womanist theology—has emerged from the struggles and faith of African American women. Womanist theology attempts to empower African American women and men in their quest for life and freedom as it makes clear that the God of Jesus Christ opposes the interlocking system of oppression that denies their humanity. Before detailing some of the characteristic features of this theology, it is instructive to clarify the meaning of the term womanist.

African American women, especially religious scholars, have adopted the term womanist as a way of indicating the distinctiveness of

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[8] Cited in Miriam Schneir, ed., *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 93.

[9] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row Publisher, 1958), p. 93.

African American women's experience in church and society. They appropriated this concept after Alice Walker coined it in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden.* In that publication Walker provides a description of womanist.[10] The term derives from the Black folk expression, "You acting womanish," which according to Walker, traditionally has meant "outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful behavior." Drawing upon womanish, Walker says a womanist is "responsible, in charge, serious." She loves other women, "sexually and/or nonsexually," but she is not a "separatist." A womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." She loves dance, the moon, the spirit, food, "roundness," struggle, the folk, and she loves herself. "Regardless." A womanist is a "Black feminist or feminist of color." As Walker concludes, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."

While the term womanist originated with Walker's definition, its meaning now goes beyond her words. African American women have adapted the term as a symbol of their experience. Womanist signals an appreciation for the richness, complexity, uniqueness and struggle involved in being African American and female in a society that is hostile to both Blackness and femaleness. The use of the term womanist in theological scholarship indicates the use of African American women's story of struggle for life and wholeness/liberation as the central source for understanding God's significance.

Reflective of African American women's experience, and commensurate with a liberation approach, womanist theology engages a social-political analysis of wholeness. As a result of their consistent commitment to their families and their community, African American women have searched for a "politics" of wholeness as they have evaluated their participation in various freedom movements, such as the contemporary women's movement and the 1960s Civil Rights/Black Power movement. These women needed a political strategy that would assure African American women and men rights to live as whole, free, human beings and that would keep the African American community whole, unified, in striving for liberation. Indicative of this particular concern, a womanist theology engages a social-political analysis of wholeness.

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[10] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, pp. xi–xii.

This analysis is multi-dimensional and bifocal. That means that it seeks to understand how race, gender, class and sexual oppression interact in the persecution of African American people, especially women. It may, for instance, be informed by Marxist thought as it endeavors to understand the class issues within the African American community. But it also goes beyond Marxist analysis in an effort to comprehend the multidimensionality of African American oppression. Moreover, unlike Marxist analysis, a social-political analysis of wholeness takes seriously the particularities of race, gender, and culture that shape the nature of African American oppression.

As it is bifocal, a social-political analysis of wholeness will confront racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism not only as they impinge upon the African American community, but also as they are nurtured within that community. It addresses the ways in which the African American community and its institutions—that is church, school—perpetuate oppression. It does not seek to prioritize different forms of oppression, or to pit women against men/the poor against the rich. It does, however, seek to eliminate anything that prevents African American people from being whole, liberated people, and from living and working together as a whole, unified community.

Commensurate with this analysis womanist theology highlights Christ's role in the African American community as a sustainer, liberator and prophet. It stresses that Christ is present in the African American community, working to sustain as well as to deliver it from the multidimensional oppression that besets it. Further it indicates Christ's presence as a prophet, challenging the community to rid itself of anything that divides it against itself.

That womanist theology engages a social-political analysis of wholeness as an integral part of its God-talk, illustrates not simply a response to African American women's experience but also a response to Jesus' liberating ministry. It reflects the challenge to do theology in such a way that it advances life and freedom for the oppressed.

So what does all of this mean for the future direction of Christian theology? Womanist theology signals a hope for the future direction of theology. It demonstrates the possibility for theological discourse that does not abstract God and Christ from the human struggle for life and freedom. It means that theology must not be confined to an incarnational approach for discerning Jesus' significance. It reveals that Christian theology does take seriously the voices of the oppressed,

even as Jesus did. In so doing, it points to the necessity of theology utilizing the kinds of analyses that allow it to have a meaningful response to injustice. Most importantly, womanist theology makes clear that the conditions which breed African American genocide and Christianity cannot peaceably co-exist.