

Introduction

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SOCIAL ETHICS IS DESCRIPTIVE, analytical, and normative reflection upon the complex dimensions of social life. Ethicists are doing social ethics whenever we describe and analyze our human experiences in social groups (race, ethnicity, gender, class) and systems (religious, educational, political, and economic) in order to propose norms that we hope will make our lives together in those groups and systems more just. In the twenty-first century the quest for more just social life is complicated by our ever-expanding acknowledgment of diverse human experiences, plural religious traditions, and global political and economic interdependence. Therefore, ethics that matters in the twenty-first century confronts difficult questions of survival for significant numbers of the earth's peoples, such as hunger, homelessness, poverty, the AIDS pandemic, human trafficking, terrorist violence, and environmental devastation. Religious social ethics in the twenty-first century must urgently propose norms for living life more abundantly and justly in response to such issues of survival.

Given the fact that two-thirds of the world's populations struggling to survive are people of color, the sources for these essays are African, Caribbean, and African American experiences. Thinking of these essays thus as sources for social ethical reflection, this text asserts that social ethics in the twenty-first century is grounded in these presuppositions of liberation ethics:

1. There is no objective or neutral perspective from which to do ethics.

2. The sources for doing ethical reflection are particular, historical, and contextual.
3. Ethical norms have universal relevance (contribute to larger moral meaning), but they cannot be universalized for all time.

In other words, in this volume the particular social, historical, political, and religious experiences of African, Caribbean, and African American peoples are the sources for social ethical reflection upon perennial questions asked by religious social ethicists, such as:

- What does it mean to be human and for humans to flourish in moral communities whose social contract is better understood as a covenant for just relationships?
- Who is our neighbor? What does it mean to love our neighbor next door and across the globe?
- What is the relationship between love and justice?
- How do we understand social sin and our complicity in it?
- What does it mean to be faithful Christians and good citizens?
- What is the relationship between belief in a sovereign God and human responsibility to work for social justice in the society and the world?

This text invites teachers and students to read these essays as sources for a social ethics that complexifies the meaning of and quest for social justice in the twenty-first century. In other words, social justice is not an abstract ethical ideal or philosophical concept; rather, what we *mean* by social justice emerges from the lived experiences—historical and contemporary—of particular peoples engaged in struggles to have meaningful and productive lives. In order for teachers and students of social ethics to use the volume as a textbook that provides resources for thinking about contemporary social issues, each part concludes with a list of key ideas, some resources, and questions that provide avenues from the essays into becoming a constructive religious social ethical thinker and agent in the twenty-first century. The essays are arranged in these four parts: (1) Moral Dilemmas, (2) Moral Community, (3) Moral Discourse, and (4) Moral Vision. Abstracts of the essays follow below.

Part One: Moral Dilemmas. This first part invites the reader to begin the journey toward becoming a constructive religious social ethical thinker by disclosing sources that challenge traditional interpretations of black spirituality, mission history, and indigenous religious sources. In the first essay, “Maps of Meaning: Black Bodies and African Spirituality as African Diaspora Trope,” Anthony B. Pinn employs the conceptual tool of mapping to break with the conventional understanding that African spirituality needs to be grounded in divinity-based conceptions of religion. Pinn argues for a more complicated and nuanced understanding of African spirituality and religion that recognizes the nontheistic and mundane resources that have also contributed to the religious and moral ethos of black existence in the face of evil. Next, Katie Geneva Cannon’s “Homecoming in the Hinterlands: Ethical Ministries of Mission in Nigeria” is about missions in Nigeria. Cannon presents “a discussion of the intersection of ethics and missions” that exposes the past harms of mission, its accommodation of imperial forms of power, and suggests a reappraisal of Christian mission in the twenty-first century. In “Women in Rastafari,” Noel Leo Erskine traces the origins of Rastafari religion to the Great Revival Church of the 1860s in Jamaica so as to expose how a theological break with its own origins produced a religion that is an expression of African patriarchy in the Caribbean. As such, Rastafari religion is premised upon a gender inequality that belies the liberation sought by the Rastafarian transformation of “Babylon.” Finally, in “Religious Pluralism in Africa: Insights from Ifa Divination Poetry,” Jacob K. Olupona draws ethical insights from Ifa divination poetry by analyzing a series of textual vignettes from Ifa poetry that disclose an Ifa “ethics of tolerance.” This ethic characterizes how indigenous religious tradition understands and engages Islam and Christianity in Africa. He suggests that the insights from this ethics of tolerance may shed light on the larger problem of “pluralism, religious interaction, and the role of religion in peaceful transnational coexistence.” These four essays provide rich points of departure for discussion of moral dilemmas posed by religious pluralism, missions or global Christianity, the relationship between religious tradition and women’s equality, and the quest for spiritual resources to address oppression in the twenty-first century.

Part Two: Moral Community. Riggins R. Earl Jr., in “The American Constitution: Its Troubling Religious and Ethical Paradox for Blacks,” reminds readers that the U.S. Constitution has been a source undergirding both the oppression and liberation of blacks. Earl discusses the way in which the constitution as a social contract ensuring justice and equality for all citizens has functioned as a racial contract with respect to African Americans. Next, in “The Challenge of Race: A Theological Reflection,” James H. Cone articulates the challenge that race poses for the discipline of theology, the life of Christian churches in U.S. society, and for others committed to lives of faith. Continuing to place race at the center of Christian identity while confronting white supremacy, Cone ultimately views the problem of race as a challenge to human faith in humanity itself. He contends that there are three interrelated challenges with regard to race in U.S. society: (1) the challenge to break our silence, (2) the challenge to listen meaningfully, and (3) the challenge to dismantle white supremacy. Dwight N. Hopkins’s concluding essay, “Race, Religion, and the Race for the White House,” is an exposé of this country’s racist practices during the campaign to elect the nation’s first African American president, Barack Obama. Hopkins speaks as a theologian about his experiences as a church member of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. His essay offers insights into the role of media as well as the lack of historical and contemporary knowledge about African American social and religious history, factors which served to vilify the black church and its religious leadership. This part offers opportunities to think about how race in various sociopolitical, ethical, and theological dimensions has ruptured moral community in the United States. Readers will leave this section informed and challenged about the politics of race and religion in the United States and encouraged to break complicity in “the continuing American dilemma”¹ in a quest for authentic moral community.

Part Three: Moral Discourse. The first essay, “‘Who is Their God?’ A Critique of the Church Based on the Kingian Prophetic Model,” by Lewis V. Baldwin, explicates the prophetic ecclesial model embodied in the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. According to Baldwin, King’s prophetic model is precisely what is needed in order to confront the

contemporary Christian church's "identity and/or definitional" crisis. Baldwin concludes by offering "a number of steps" whereby the church might reclaim King's "prophetic vision and posture." Next, "Onward, Christian Soldiers! Race, Religion, and Nationalism in Post-Civil Rights America," by Jonathan L. Walton, is a descriptive and constructive evaluation of the ways in which conservative Christian broadcasters have developed and actively maintained a Christian nationalist worldview. Walton does a comparative analysis of the ministries of the late Reverend Jerry Falwell and Bishop Eddie L. Long as paradigmatic white and African American Christian nationalisms. He concludes by impressing upon us the need to take seriously the rhetoric of Christian nationalists if we as a society desire to have a stable and flourishing liberal democracy. Walton's essay is followed by Rosetta E. Ross's "Overcoming Christianization: Reconciling Spiritual and Intellectual Resources in African American Christianity." Here Ross explores a perennial conflict experienced in African American Christianity and the institutional black churches: the tensions between religion and politics. Ross proposes that reconciling tensions and conflicts around the appropriateness of political engagement by black Christians and churches is critical to the institutional relevance of black churches "to progressive movements that enhance the lives of persons, generally, and dispossessed black people in particular." She makes her case for reconciling the religion/politics tensions by appealing to the legacy of critical thinking and practical reasoning expressed in the civil rights activism of Septima Poinsette Clark and now evident in contemporary young progressives who refer to themselves as the "Joshua Generation." Part 3 concludes with an essay titled "A Moral Epistemology of Gender Violence," by Traci C. West. West gives voice to the conceptual and social breakdown between (1) society's near universal public certainty that gender violence is immoral and (2) an inability to translate that public disapproval into "ongoing social and institutional practices to stop it from taking place." Most significantly, West insists that communities find ways to translate antiviolence moral values into antiviolence public practices. These four essays push us to explore the relationship between moral language and moral practice. Moral language is always a socially constructed product of particular, historical, contextual circumstances. Moral practice reflects moral

language. A significant twenty-first-century ethical task is to use moral language that fosters just and nonviolent moral practice in church and society.

Part Four: Moral Vision. This final part opens with the essay “An Ecowomanist Vision” by Melanie L. Harris, who proposes a “new theological inquiry into environmental ethics,” ecowomanism. Harris grounds this new inquiry in an articulation of the correspondences between the womanist quest for “the communal survival and wholeness of entire peoples” and the advocacy of “vision and value of community” found in the Christian social ethics of Peter J. Paris. In “An American Public Theology in the Absence of Giants: Creative Conflict and Democratic Longings,” Victor Anderson argues for the recovery of an American public theology as the basis of a common public faith that undergirds a truly democratic common life and organization of citizens in the context of our postmodern, fragmented times. Importantly, Anderson is not mired in a lament for the lost giants of the past. Instead, he suggests that it is the “faithful ordinary,” local publics, who will now provide the conceptual and lived resources for an American public theology and the vision of a better democracy. Next, in “Walking on the Rimbones of Nothingness: Embodied Scholarship for Those of Us Way Down Under the Sun,” Emilie M. Townes draws upon the work of Zora Neal Hurston (1891–1960) to highlight the importance of folklore for theological and ethical reflection. Townes suggests that Hurston’s folklore provides a narrative context in which a recovery of the role of vision (or imagination) in black religion may be realized. In addition, Townes extends her argument by inviting scholars of religion and theology to do embodied scholarship, that is, scholarship done in partnership with everyday people. In the final essay, “Still on the Journey: Moral Witness, Imagination, and Improvisation in Public Life,” Barbara A. Holmes calls all of us to public lives of care and concern in a post–civil rights, post-9/11, post-Katrina world. Holmes contends that moral witness to justice and truth is preserved in art. She pushes for a trust in human creativity and the regenerative presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit because this will lead to improvisation in public life. In her words: “Improvisation creates opportunities for laughter, community formation, and sharing, even

while we continue the work of justice.” These final essays bring us full circle to what may be the most critical ethical tasks in the twenty-first century: moral imagination and moral vision. Drawing upon African and African American sources, cognizant of the enduring impact of race, and speaking from the particularity of black faith, religion, literature, and art, these essays move through the descriptive and analytic tasks of doing ethics to the prescriptive task of self-consciously proposing norms. Each essay offers us moral visions and norms for transformation that speak out of and to the “souls of black folk”² as a way forward toward a moral community of justice for all peoples and the planet Earth.