CHAPTER 1

Foundations

An Opening Case

Think about a decision you may have faced recently—say, whether to allow a friend to plagiarize your work or whether to lie about when you last had your HIV status tested. (It could be a completely different decision of course.) Think about what shaped your decision. What made you decide the way you did? Should those considerations have had such influence?

Introduction

In this chapter, we focus not on an "issue" per se but explore instead what basic sources of moral wisdom give direction to Christians when addressing moral issues. Our "case question" can be considered in at least two ways: what in fact shapes our decisions? And what ought to shape our decisions? We will focus almost exclusively on the latter way of approaching the question.

The question of what is foundational to moral analysis raises a host of difficult and intriguing issues for people of faith. Over the centuries, Christians have appealed to Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in their decision making. How these sources are defined has varied across denominations and centuries. Protestants and Roman Catholics have slightly different biblical canons. Tradition for some Christians includes the Book of Common Prayer, while others rely on papal encyclicals or general assembly policy statements. Many look for moral wisdom in the arguments of great theologians and mystics, while others find the images in Christian hymns to

be morally formative. To complicate matters further, some Christians claim to rely only on Scripture, while Christians from other denominations may give more authority to a different source of wisdom. What role each of these sources of wisdom should play in determining Christian responses to moral issues is a matter of great complexity and import.

The Bible is a, if not *the*, central source of moral, as well as theological, insight for all Christians. Its normative impact for Christian is profound. At the same time, what the Scriptures actually say about any particular moral issue, as well as what kind of authority should be ascribed to that testimony, are matters that elicit quite different responses among Christians. Like the interpretation of an experience, scientific data, or philosophical distinctions, determining precisely what the Bible may have to say about a moral issue is a complex enterprise. Whenever one tries to relate the content of a body of literature from thousands of years ago to contemporary issues, the interpreter has to understand the sociohistorical context(s) in which that literature emerged, the type of literature it is, and his or her own context, among other questions. Even if we do not believe what a text meant should predetermine what it means today, we must ask what the moral judgments of the authors might have meant in their context before we can meaningfully relate what they said to our own questions.

A formidable and hotly contested body of scholarship surrounds the discipline of biblical studies. Some argue that "what the Bible says" is literally self-evident, while others conclude that we only ever hear what human, fallible biblical interpreters have to say. Additionally, there remains considerable disagreement among biblical scholars as to what kinds of moral wisdom the Bible brings to the process of moral discernment. Is the story of the good Samaritan any less morally significant than the Ten Commandments? Beginning with Karl Barth's axiom that the Bible is endlessly "strange and new," Walter Brueggemann, in our first essay, traces six implications of this premise for his conception of biblical authority and the process of biblical interpretation. Inherent in the Bible is the fundamental revelation of God's staggering love for all of creation. It is faith in this God that establishes a baseline for the always provisional interpretations of Christians and opens them to imaginative inspiration. The brief article by Phyllis Trible uncovers the way ideologies of our context frequently, if not inescapably, influence our interpretation and application of biblical texts.

Ronald Osborn's essay about the killing of Osama bin Laden exemplifies how the just war tradition might well inform Christian thinking about military action, including its victories. How are Christians to deal with the death of one of our foes? Osborn concludes that there were elements of the operation that did indeed reflect the just war tradition, while others seemed to violate that tradition. Though it is difficult to grieve such a death, the Christian just war tradition illumines why it is inappropriate to see bin Laden's killing as part of America's redemptive narrative.

David Hogue tells us how he learned to stop worrying and love the brain. His article highlights the foundational roles of both reason and experience in Christian ethics. There are sources of knowledge and truth that are not exclusively Christian: among them are reason and the human ability to explore insights about the natural, which includes the human, world. In this

article, Hogue recounts his own hesitancy about neurobiology and the fear that neurobiology, especially brain science, would simply reduce religious thought to neurons and nonreflective kinesis. He argues that, in fact, science can be an important ally and source of wisdom in regard to the moral life. God's activity is revealed in the brain as well as elsewhere in the human body. The Christian theological tradition, which has too often been shaped by a suspicion of science, can be significantly enriched and expanded by the considerations of scientific knowledge.

Broadly human, and explicitly religious, experience can be in agreement with Christian beliefs, and they both surely inform Christian ethics. Feminist writings claim that historically the experience of women has been overlooked as a resource in thinking about moral decisions. A significant body of literature has argued persuasively that the experience of women—African American, Anglo, Asian, *mujerista*, and Native American—is an important authority when thinking about the foundations for ethics. In the fifth selection of this chapter, womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland appeals to the experience of suffering in all people's lives, but especially in the experience of black women. She mines particularly their experience of resistance as a resource for developing the womanist perspective on suffering. What is striking about the article is the way it displays how human experiences from a particular social location can illumine for all Christians the place of suffering in the moral life.

While there are many other sources of authority for Christian ethics, these selections point to four of them: the Bible, tradition, experience, and scientific data. Return to your "case question" for a second. Do you have a "sacred" canon to which you turn for insight? What is it? (For some people, the US Constitution sets the parameters for what they believe to be moral.) What role does your own experience or that of others play in your decision? Did sociological or biological facts enter into your decision? Consider your understanding of God, or what functions as a god for you. Did those convictions enter into the particular decision you brought to mind?

Biblical Authority

Walter Brueggemann

The authority of the Bible is a perennial and urgent issue for those of us who stake our lives on its testimony. This issue, however, is bound to remain unsettled and therefore perpetually disputatious. It cannot be otherwise, since the biblical text is endlessly "strange and new." It always and inescapably outdistances our categories of understanding and explanation, of interpretation and control. Because the Bible is "the live word of the living God," it will not compliantly submit to the accounts we prefer to give of it. There is something intrinsically unfamiliar about the book; and when we seek to override that unfamiliarity, we are on the hazardous ground of idolatry. Rather than proclaiming loud, dogmatic slogans about the Bible, we might do better to consider the odd and intimate ways in which we have each been led to where we are in our relationship with the scriptures.

How each of us reads the Bible is partly the result of family, neighbors and friends (a socialization process), and partly the God-given accident of long-term development in faith. Consequently, the real issues of biblical authority and interpretation are not likely to be settled by cognitive formulations or by appeals to classic confessions. These issues live in often unrecognized, uncriticized and deeply powerful ways—especially if they are rooted (as they may be for most of us) in hurt, anger or anxiety.

Decisions about biblical meanings are not made on the spot, but result from the growth of habits and convictions. And if that is so, then the disputes over meaning require

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not frontal arguments but long-term pastoral attentiveness to one another in good faith.

A church in dispute will require great self-knowing candor and a generous openness among its members. Such attentiveness may lead us to recognize that the story of someone else's nurture in the faith could be a transformative gift that allows us to read the text in a new way. My own story leads me to identify six facets of biblical interpretation that I believe are likely to be operative among us all.

Inherency

The Bible is inherently the live word of God, revealing the character and will of God and empowering us for an alternative life in the world. While I believe in the indeterminacy of the text to some large extent, I know that finally the Bible is forceful and consistent in its main theological claim. It expresses the conviction that the God who created the world in love redeems the world in suffering and will consummate the world in joyous well-being. That flow of conviction about God's self-disclosure in the Bible is surely the main claim of the apostolic faith, a claim upon which the church fundamentally agrees. That fundamental agreement is, of course, the beginning of the conversation and not its conclusion; but it is a deep and important starting point. From that inherent claim certain things follow:

First, all of us in the church are bound together by this foundation of apostolic faith. As my tradition affirms, "in essentials unity." It also means, moreover, that in disputes about biblical authority nobody has the high ground morally or hermeneutically. Our common commitment to the truth of the book makes us equal before the book, as it does around the table.

Second, since the inherency of evangelical truth in the book is focused on its main claims, it follows that there is much in the text that is "lesser," not a main claim, but probes and attempts over the generations to carry the main claims to specificity. These attempts are characteristically informed by particular circumstance and are open to variation, nuance and even contradiction. It is a primal Reformation principle that our faith is evangelical, linked to the good news and not to biblicism. The potential distinction between good news and lesser claims can lead to much dispute.

Third, the inherent word of God in the biblical text is refracted through many authors who were not disembodied voices of revealed truth but circumstance-situated men and women of faith (as are we all) who said what their circumstances permitted and required them to say of that which is truly inherent. It is this human refraction that makes the hard work of critical study inescapable, so that every text is given a suspicious scrutiny whereby we may consider the ways in which bodied humanness has succeeded or not succeeded in bearing truthful and faithful witness.

Fourth, given both inherency and circumstance-situated human refraction, the Bible is so endlessly a surprise beyond us that Karl Barth famously and rightly termed it "strange and new." The Bible is not a fixed, frozen, readily exhausted read; it is, rather, a "script," always reread, through which the Spirit makes all things new. When the church adjudicates between the inherent and the circumstance-situated, it is sorely tempted to settle, close and idolize. Therefore, inherency of an evangelical

kind demands a constant resistance to familiarity. Nobody's reading is final or inerrant, precisely because the key Character in the book who creates, redeems and consummates is always beyond us in holy hiddenness. When we push boldly through the hiddenness, wanting to know more clearly, what we thought was holy ground turns out to be a playground for idolatry. Our reading, then, is inescapably provisional. It is rightly done with the modesty of those who are always to be surprised again by what is "strange and new."

Interpretation

Recognizing the claim of biblical authority is not difficult as it pertains to the main affirmations of apostolic faith. But from that base line, the hard, disputatious work of interpretation needs to be recognized precisely for what it is: nothing more than interpretation. As our mothers and fathers have always known, the Bible is not self-evident and self-interpreting, and the Reformers did not mean to say that it was so when they escaped the church's magisterium. Rather the Bible requires and insists upon human interpretation, which is inescapably subjective, necessarily provisional and inevitably disputatious. I propose as an interpretive rule that all of our interpretations need to be regarded, at the most, as having only tentative authority. This will enable us to make our best, most insistent claims, but then regularly relinquish our pet interpretations and, together with our partners in dispute, fall back in joy into the inherent apostolic claims that outdistance all of our too familiar and too partisan interpretations. We may learn from the rabbis the marvelous rhythm of deep interpretive dispute and profound common yielding in joy and affectionate well-being. The characteristic and sometimes demonic mode of Reformed interpretation is not tentativeness and relinquishment, but tentativeness hardening into absoluteness. It often becomes a sleight-of-hand act, substituting our interpretive preference for the inherency of apostolic claims.

The process of interpretation which precludes final settlement on almost all questions is evident in the Bible itself. A stunning case in point is the Mosaic teaching in Deuteronomy 23:1–8 that bans from the community all those with distorted sexuality and all those who are foreigners. In Isaiah 56:3–8 this Mosaic teaching is overturned in the Bible itself, offering what Herbert Donner terms an intentional "abrogation" of Mosaic law through new teaching. The old, no doubt circumstance-driven exclusion is answered by a circumstance-driven inclusiveness.

In Deuteronomy 24:1, moreover, Moses teaches that marriages broken in infidelity cannot be restored, even if both parties want to get back together. But in Jeremiah 3, in a shocking reversal given in a pathos-filled poem, God's own voice indicates a readiness to violate that Torah teaching for the sake of restored marriage to Israel. The old teaching is seen to be problematic even for God. The latter text shows God prepared to move beyond the old prohibition of Torah in order that the inherent evangelical claims of God's graciousness may be fully available even to a recalcitrant Israel. In embarrassment and perhaps even in humiliation, the God of Jeremiah's poem willfully overrides the old text. It becomes clear that the interpretive project that constitutes the final form of the text is itself profoundly polyvalent, yielding no single

exegetical outcome, but allowing layers and layers of fresh reading in which God's own life and character are deeply engaged and put at risk.

Imagination

Responsible interpretation requires imagination. I understand that imagination makes serious Calvinists nervous because it smacks of the subjective freedom to carry the text in undeveloped directions and to engage in fantasy. But I would insist that imagination is in any case inevitable in any interpretive process that is more than simple reiteration, and that faithful imagination is characteristically not autonomous fantasy but good-faith extrapolation. I understand imagination, no doubt a complex epistemological process, to be the capacity to entertain images of meaning and reality that are beyond the givens of observable experience. That is, imagination is the hosting of "otherwise," and I submit that every serious teacher or preacher invites people to an "otherwise" beyond the evident. Without that we have nothing to say. We must take risks and act daringly to push beyond what is known to that which is hoped for and trusted but not yet in hand.

Interpretation is not the reiteration of the text but, rather, the movement of the text beyond itself in fresh, often formerly unuttered ways. Jesus' parables are a prime example. They open the listening community to possible futures. Beyond parabolic teaching, however, there was in ancient Israel and in the early church an observant wonder. As eyewitnesses created texts out of observed and remembered miracles, texted miracles in turn become materials for imagination that pushed well beyond what was given or intended even in the text. This is an inescapable process for those of us who insist that the Bible is a contemporary word to us. We transport ourselves out of the twenty-first century back to the ancient world of the text or, conversely, we transpose ancient voices into contemporary voices of authority.

Those of us who think critically do not believe that the Old Testament was talking about Jesus, and yet we make the linkages. Surely Paul was not thinking of the crisis over sixteenth-century indulgences when he wrote about "faith alone." Surely Isaiah was not thinking of Martin Luther King's dream of a new earth. Yet we make such leaps all the time. What a huge leap to imagine that the primal commission to "till and keep the earth" (Gen. 2:15) is really about environmental issues and the chemicals used by Iowa farmers. Yet we make it. What a huge leap to imagine that the ancient provision for Jubilee in Leviticus 25 has anything to do with the cancellation of Third World debt or with an implied critique of global capitalism. Yet we make it. What a huge leap to imagine that an ancient purity code in Leviticus 18 bears upon consenting gays and lesbians in the twenty-first century and has anything to do with ordination. Yet we make it.

We are all committed to the high practice of subjective extrapolations because we have figured out that a cold, reiterative objectivity has no missional energy or moral force. We do it, and will not stop doing it. It is, however, surely healing and humbling for us to have enough self-knowledge to concede that what we are doing will not carry the freight of absoluteness.

Imagination can indeed be a gift of the Spirit, but it is a gift used with immense

subjective freedom. Therefore, after our imaginative interpretations are made with vigor in dispute with others in the church, we must regularly, gracefully and with modesty fall back from our best extrapolations to the sure apostolic claims that lie behind our extremities of imagination, liberal or conservative.

Ideology

A consideration of ideology is difficult for us because we American church people are largely innocent about our own interpretive work. We are seldom aware of or honest about the ways in which our work is shot through with distorting vested interests. But it is so, whether we know it or not. There is no interpretation of scripture (nor of anything else) that is unaffected by the passions, convictions and perceptions of the interpreter. Ideology is the self-deceiving practice of taking a part for the whole, of taking "my truth" for the truth, of palming off the particular as a universal. It is so already in the text of scripture itself, as current scholarship makes clear, because the spirit-given text is given us by and through human authors. It is so because spirit-filled interpretation is given us by and through bodied authors who must make their way in the world—and in making our way, we humans do not see so clearly or love so dearly or follow so nearly as we might imagine.

There are endless examples of ideology at work in interpretation. Historical criticism is no innocent practice, for it intends to fend off church authority and protect the freedom of the autonomous interpreter. Canonical criticism is no innocent practice, for it intends to maintain old coherences against the perceived threat of more recent fragmentation. High moralism is no innocent practice, even if it sounds disciplined and noble, for much of it grows out of fear and is a strategy to fend off anxiety. Communitarian inclusiveness is no innocent practice, because it reflects a reaction against exclusivism and so is readily given to a kind of reactive carelessness.

There is enough truth in every such interpretive posture and strategy—and a hundred others we might name—to make it credible and to gather a constituency for it. But it is not ideologically innocent, and therefore has no absolute claim.

In a disputatious church, a healthy practice might be to reflect upon the ideological passion not of others, but of one's self and one's cohorts. I believe that such reflection would invariably indicate that every passionate interpretive voice is shot through with vested interest, sometimes barely hidden. It is completely predictable that interpreters who are restrictive about gays and lesbians will characteristically advocate high capitalism and a strong national defense. Conversely, those who are "open and affirming" will characteristically maintain a critique of consumer capitalism, and consensus on a whole cluster of other issues. One can argue that such a package only indicates a theological-ethical coherence. Perhaps, but in no case is the package innocent, since we incline to make our decisions without any critical reflection, but only in order to sustain the package.

Every passionate vested interest has working in it a high measure of anxiety about deep threats, perhaps perceived, perhaps imagined. And anxiety has a force that permits us to deal in wholesale categories without the nuance of the particular. A judgment grounded in anxiety, anywhere on the theological spectrum,

does not want to be disturbed or informed by facts on the ground. Every vested interest shaped by anxiety has near its source old fears that are deep and hidden, but for all of that authoritative. Everyone has at its very bottom hurt—old hurt, new hurt, hurt for ourselves, for those we remember, for those we love. The lingering, unhealed pain becomes a hermeneutical principle out of which we will not be talked.

Every ideological passion, liberal or conservative, may be encased in scripture itself or enshrined in longstanding interpretation until it is regarded as absolute and trusted as decisive authority. And where an ideology becomes loud and destructive in the interpretive community, we may be sure that the doses of anxiety, fear and hurt within it are huge and finally irrepressible.

I do not for an instant suggest that no distinctions can be made, nor that it is so dark that all cats are gray. And certainly, given our ideological passions, we must go on and interpret in any case. But I do say that in our best judgments concerning scripture, we might be aware enough of our propensity to distort in the service of vested interests, anxiety, fear and hurt that we recognize that our best interpretation might be not only a vehicle for but also a block to and distortion of the crucified truth of the gospel.

I have come belatedly to see, in my own case, that my hermeneutical passion is largely propelled by the fact that my father was a pastor who was economically abused by the church he served, abused as a means of control. I cannot measure the ways in which that felt awareness determines how I work, how I interpret, who I read, whom I trust as a reliable voice. The wound is deep enough to pervade everything; I suspect, moreover, that I am not the only one for whom this is true. It could be that we turn our anxieties, fears and hurts to good advantage as vehicles for obedience. But even in so doing, we are put on notice. We cannot escape from such passions; but we can submit them to brothers and sisters whose own history of distortion is very different from ours and as powerful in its defining force.

Inspiration

It is traditional to speak of scripture as "inspired." There is a long history of unhelpful formulations of what that notion might mean. Without appealing to classical formulations that characteristically have more to do with "testing" the spirit (1 John 4:1) than with "not quenching" the spirit (1 Thess. 5:19), we may affirm that the force of God's purpose, will and capacity for liberation, reconciliation and new life is everywhere in the biblical text. In such an affirmation, of course, we say more than we can understand, for the claim is precisely an acknowledgment that in and through this text, God's wind blows through and past all our critical and confessional categories of reading and understanding. That powerful and enlivening force, moreover, pertains not simply to the ordaining of the text but to its transmission and interpretation among us.

The spirit will not be regimented, and therefore none of our reading is guaranteed to be inspired. But it does happen on occasion. It does happen that in and through the text we are blown beyond ourselves. It does happen that the spirit teaches, guides and heals through the text, so that the text yields something other than an echo of ourselves. It does

happen that in prayer and study believers are led to what is "strange and new." It does happen that preachers are led to utterances beyond what they set out to make. It does happen that churches, in councils, sessions and other courts, are led beyond themselves, powered beyond prejudice, liberated beyond convention, overwhelmed by the capacity for new risks.

Importance

Biblical interpretation, done with imagination willing to risk ideological distortion, open to the inspiring spirit, is important. But it is important not because it might allow some to seize control of the church, but because it gives the world access to the good truth of the God who creates, redeems and consummates. That missional intention is urgent in every circumstance and season. The church at its most faithful has always understood that we read scripture for the sake of the church's missional testimony.

But the reading of the Bible is now especially urgent because our society is sore tempted to reduce the human project to commodity. In its devotion to the making of money it reduces persons to objects and thins human communications to electronic icons. Technique in all its military modes and derivatively in every other mode threatens us. Technique is aimed at control, the fencing out of death, the fencing out of gift and, eventually, the fencing out of humanness.

Nonetheless, we in the church dare affirm that the lively word of scripture is the primal antidote to technique, the primal news that fends off trivialization. Thinning to control and trivializing to evade ambiguity are the major goals of our culture. The church in its disputatious anxiety is tempted to join the move to technique, to thin the Bible and make it one-dimensional, deeply tempted to trivialize the Bible by acting as though it is important because it may solve some disruptive social inconvenience. The dispute tends to reduce what is rich and dangerous in the book to knowable technique, and what is urgent and immense to exhaustible trivia.

The Bible is too important to be reduced in this way because the dangers of the world are too great and the expectations of God are too large. What if liberals and conservatives in the church, for all their disagreement, would together put their energies to upholding the main truth against the main threat? The issues before God's creation (of which we are stewards) are immense; those issues shame us when our energy is deployed only to settle our anxieties. The biblical script insists that the world is not without God, not without the holy gift of life rooted in love. And yet we twitter! The Bible is a lamp and light to fend off the darkness. The darkness is real, and the light is for walking boldly, faithfully in a darkness we do not and cannot control. In this crisis, the church must consider what is entrusted peculiarly to us in this book.

Recently an Israeli journalist in Jerusalem commented on the fracturing dispute in Israel over who constitutes a real Jew, orthodox, conservative or reform. And he said about the dispute, "If any Jew wins, all Jews lose." Think about it: "If anyone wins, everyone loses."

The Bible in Transit

Phyllis Trible

Recently I have been pondering anew the Book of Ruth—or rather feminist interpretations of it. So numerous and diverse have they become that I begin to wonder about the hermeneutical enterprise, especially its place in the church. Accompanying me on these wonderings is not, however, Ruth (to it we shall return) but instead two questions from the story of Hagar.

Treated harshly by her Hebrew mistress Sarai, the Egyptian slave Hagar fled to a wilderness nourished by a spring of water (Gen 16). There a messenger of God asked her, "Where have you come from? And where are you going?" Hagar answered the first question, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai," but never addressed the second. Speaking about the present, she named the past and left open the future. (In time, the unfolding of her story disclosed that terrifying answer.)

Across Decades

Mutatis mutandis, these two questions fit my wanderings about feminist interpretation of the Bible. Indeed, "Where have we come from? And where are we going?" The first question is not difficult to answer. We are fleeing the land of patriarchal (male-dominated) hermeneutics to find oases of nourishment in the wilderness. In the United States, this answer began to emerge in the late 1960s, when the second wave of feminism moved into the field of religion. Mary Daly at Boston College led the way.[1] By the 1970s the movement turned attention to the Bible. Though

From, "The Bible in Transit," by Phyllis Trible, which first appeared in *Reflections* 98, no. 1 (spring 2011): 31–33. © 2011 Divinity Publications.

Daly denounced it *in toto*, other voices spoke differently. Letty M. Russell of Yale Divinity School edited a small book whose title, *The Liberating Word: A Guide to Nonsexist Interpretation of the Bible* (1976), made clear that not all feminists reject the Bible and, further, that men do not control interpretations of it.[2] Some thirty-five years later, we continue to answer the question, "Where have we come from?"

Across decades this "we" has expanded to embrace diverse voices within church, synagogue, and society at large. Race, class, sex, ethnicity, age, gender orientation, cultural, social, economic, and historical situations, plus individual experiences all these and other variables shape and reshape interpretations. In addition, varieties of disciplines—historical criticism, archaeology, sociology, literary analyses, linguistics, psychology, the new historicism—complicate the mix. Descriptions of where we are and forecasts of where we might go are far from simple.

The Benign Book of Ruth

To pursue the matter, let us return to the seemingly benign Book of Ruth. In 1978, I, a white Protestant woman in the United States, read it as a story of redemption.[3] The Judahite mother-in-law Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, both widows, worked out their own salvation with fear and trembling, with audacity and strength, in a world that had little place for them. Early on, Orpah, the other widowed Moabite daughter-in-law, obeyed Naomi and returned to her own "mother's house." Without censure, she departed the story. Then, in an ironic twist, Ruth disobeyed Naomi and returned with her to Judah. Each of the three women made her own decision. As the story continued, Naomi and Ruth surmounted barriers of age, ethnicity, culture, custom, and familial patterns. They showed even God a more excellent way than famine, exile, and death. Reflecting on Ruth now, I find the story as redemptive as first I found it. From where I have come, there I am going.

Ten years after this reading (1988), the African American Christian professor Renita J. Weems wrote about Ruth under the general rubric of "a Womanist vision."[4] The hymnic title of her essay sounded its stance: "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." For Weems, the story promotes friendship—"female bonding" between Naomi and Ruth. As for Orpah, her decision to return home is "common sense." It does not destroy "the love bond between the two women." With a pastoral bent, Weems averred that Naomi and Ruth "eventually found the healing power of God in each other's love and forbearance."

Six years later (1994), the Jewish author Cynthia Ozick described Naomi, after the death of her husband Elimelech, as transformed from a character of "compliance" to "a woman of valor," with "a program of autonomy."[5] She described Orpah as a model of normality, in no way to be overlooked or censured. As Orpah left the story, the singularity of Ruth emerged. This woman possessed insight "vaster than the merely familial." Overall, Ozick deemed Ruth a book "wherein goodness grows out of goodness, and the extraordinary is found here, and here, and here"—a book, she said, where "mercy and redemption unfold."

Similarly, the Jewish scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky, writing in 2002, extolled "this charming

narrative" of friendship between Naomi and Ruth.[6] Though never referring to Orpah, she claimed that "all the characters are noteworthy for their mindfulness of God's blessing and for their willingness to demonstrate *hesed*, 'loving-kindness,' by acting benevolently toward one another beyond the expectations of legal and even moral obligations."

Diversity Within

Spanning decades, these positive readings of Ruth challenge patriarchy in church and synagogue. Yet the positive may not prevail. The collection of essays to which Ozick contributed, for example, offers a host of divergent ideas, all proposed by Jewish women living in the United States or Israel. Some of them view Naomi as a cipher for male values that find fulfillment for women in marriage and children. Others see Naomi as a childless widow who does not remarry and thereby achieves a status independent of husband and children. Some find her an overbearing, interfering, and domineering mother-in-law; others, a caring, concerned, altruistic mother-in-law. For some, Naomi is an embittered old woman who, at first, denounces God for her troubles and, at last, fails *even* to thank God when she has recovered. For others, she is a figure of faith who experiences God as enemy but perseveres to seek blessing in adversity.

From diverse Jewish perspectives in the United States and Israel, we move to diverse Christian perspectives in Asian countries. There also, positive slants contend with negative. While lecturing in the Philippines, Kathy Doob Sakenfeld of Princeton Theological Seminary learned of the encouragement that the Book of Ruth brings to women struggling for their daily bread—for sheer economic survival.[7] But she also heard about a young woman from a destitute family who (naively) agreed to work as a "dancer" in a wealthy foreign country. When questioned about the decision, she compared her situation to Ruth's offering of herself to Boaz, and God "making everything turn out right."

Several years ago, Korean students at Union Theological Seminary told me that certain churches in their homeland use Ruth to compel young brides to serve their mothers-in-law rather than form independent families and seek their own employment. In marriage ceremonies, the bride is expected (required?) to pledge allegiance to her mother-in-law by quoting to her (not to the groom, as sometimes regrettably happens in Western ceremonies) Ruth's words of devotion to Naomi (1:16-17). Thereby, traditional values are upheld as Christian values. In this setting, Korean feminists find no healing power in Ruth's story. To the contrary, it is used against them.

Post-colonial voices sound strikingly different notes. Cornell University English professor Laura E. Donaldson, of Cherokee descent, criticizes Ruth for promoting "the use of intermarriage as an assimilationist strategy."[8] The decision by Moabite Ruth to adopt the country, people, and God of her Judahite mother-in-law would, if emulated, erase the identity of indigenous peoples. Sadly, that erasure often happened in the treatment of Native Americans by white invaders of European ancestry. Rejecting the view of Ruth as a model for tolerance, bravery, and diversity, a post-colonialist reader may well see her as a betrayer, collaborating with the enemy.

Yet within the story Donaldson finds a counter-narrative. It belongs to Orpah, the

daughter-in-law who departed early, leaving Naomi and returning to her "mother's house" (1:14). That reference echoes Cherokee society, which is historically matrilineal. By remaining faithful to her traditions and her ancestors, Orpah becomes for Donaldson "the story's central character." Her decision, not Ruth's, is the paradigm to emulate. This postmodern reading turns the story against itself. This post-colonialist perspective would transform "Ruth's positive value into a negative and Orpah's negative value into a positive."

A Confusion of Tongues

Redemptive, destructive, ambiguous: judgments about the Book of Ruth range from the benign to the fractious. Some of them stay close to the text; some select from it; some stray from it. Far from unique, what happens with this one book extends to readings of countless Biblical texts, as feminists flee the land of patriarchy to confront the terrors, blessings, and uncertainties of scripture in the wilderness.

From where we have come, we know. But where are we going? Confronting that question, I call upon another Biblical story: the Tower of Babel (Gen 11). At the beginning, the people of the earth spoke with one language and the same words. At the end, they spoke in confused tongues, not understanding one another, as God scattered them over the face of the earth. Contemporary interpretation reflects this story.

But what does the reflection mean? Is the Babel story, in our context, a judgment against the hubris of hermeneutical singularity—only one valid interpretation—or is it a judgment for multiple and diverse voices as an antidote to hubris? If the latter, how do we transform the confusion of tongues anything goes into benefits of multiculturalism? Is the church up to the challenge posed by a malleable text in changing contexts?

For me, doubts abound. With a few exceptions, so-called mainline churches are shrinking in strength and substance. Moreover, I do not find them grappling with Biblical hermeneutics. Instead, I find scripture cited as illustration and jumping off place—sometimes invoked as traditionally understood and other times ignored. For churches to slight the Bible, in whatever way, leaves us without a shared narrative from which faith, ethics, and action can spring. Where there is no narrative, the church stumbles into boredom and irrelevance.

Borrowing questions asked of Hagar and using the Book of Ruth, we have engaged feminist Biblical interpretation. Not unlike Hagar's answer, ours has named the past, spoken about the present, and left open the future. Now as we continue our struggles in the wilderness of confused tongues, we wait, watch, and wonder—for we know, from where we have come, that the story goes on.

A Death to Celebrate? The Just-War Tradition and the Killing of Osama Bin Laden

Ronald Osborn

During the Middle Ages—the historical context for the rise of what would come to be known as the "just war" tradition—violence under any circumstance was deemed a great evil by the church. In official Catholic teaching, combat was accepted as legitimate only when it prevented still greater evils and led to an otherwise unobtainable peace. The common ecclesiastical opinion, though, was that virtually all wars by the feudal nobility were waged from *libido dominandi*, lacked just cause, and resulted in far greater harm than good.

The rules of "just war" were not developed in courts by religious advisers keen to justify war. Rather, the tradition took shape largely in the setting of the confessional. It was codified in canon law by priests who wanted to limit the brutality of war and who were responding to a very practical question: Should knights returning from the battlefield be allowed to partake of the Eucharist? "Just war" precepts were applied to determine what sorts of penance soldiers should be made to perform before being fully readmitted to the Body of Christ.

There was no place, then, for triumphal displays in the aftermath of wars or violence, even when a conflict was seen as a tragic necessity or manifestation of God's providential punishment of the wicked by the sword of the magistrate. The authorities who served as the agents of God's wrath might themselves reap the violence they sowed. The moral legitimacy of taking any human life made in the *imago Dei* was always at best a regrettable concession to the violent realities of the "city

From, "A Death to Celebrate?" by Ronald Osborn, *Commonweal* (June 3, 2011): 7–8. © 2011 Commonweal Foundation, reprinted with permission. For more information, visit http://www.commonwealmagazine.org.

of man" still in defiance of the City of God. In all cases, the attitude of believers toward wars and killing was to be one of somber soul-searching and even mourning for their enemies.

These ideas originated largely with St. Augustine, whose "just war" teachings fused Roman legal and Old Testament sources and proved decisive for Catholic political thought over the next millennium. Tragically, Augustine provided the doctrinal framework not only for limited wars of just cause but also for the brutal persecution of "heretics" in the name of corrective love. His ideas would later help inspire the largely unrestrained holy war tradition of the crusades.

Nevertheless, Augustine and later medieval thinkers provide at least some resources for Christians seeking to understand and resist the violence of imperium in any age. Their insistence that wars be waged with purity of heart or right intention, if taken seriously, is in fact deeply subversive of violence of any kind. As the Augustine scholar Michael Hanby observes, "The very qualities that make Christians just warriors also make them unfit to fight." Christian hope, Hanby continues, refuses "to situate human horror within the teleology of empire . . . and it refuses the consoling rhetoric that trivializes suffering and forestalls any reflection beyond that designed to congratulate ourselves."

These widely forgotten requirements of the just-war tradition—the duties of loving intention even in the midst of combat, and somber reflection and mourning in the moment of victory—came to mind as I listened to President Barack Obama's May 1 speech announcing that U.S. special forces had killed Osama bin Laden.

One cannot but empathize with the family members of the victims of September 11 who have expressed relief and satisfaction at the knowledge that the man who helped to mastermind the attack is now himself dead. Anyone possessing any moral sensitivity at all will agree that bin Laden reaped the fruit of violence he had sown. By all accounts the operation was conducted with great courage and skill. No American lives were lost. Bin Laden's body was quickly disposed of in keeping with Muslim custom. The burial at sea included the reading of religious rites in Arabic. All these facts of the operation as reported by U.S. officials are in keeping with the demands of the just-war tradition.

Yet there was much in Obama's speech—and in the scenes of spontaneous chanting, patriotic singing, and jubilant flag-waving across the country that followed—that ought to give Christians, and not only pacifists such as myself, great pause. The archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has pointed out that serious questions must be asked any time an unarmed man who is not returning fire is killed—before the eyes of his wife and twelve-year-old daughter, we now learn—rather than apprehended and forced to stand trial. Even accepting the highly implausible official account that bin Laden would have been captured rather than killed had he not in some way resisted, troubling questions remain.

In his speech, the president declared, "After nearly ten years of service, struggle, and sacrifice, we"—referring exclusively to Americans—"know well the costs of war." But the people who have borne the greatest costs of the "war on terror" are the people of Iraq, including the millions of refugees and the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed as a

result of America's unjust policy of "preemptive" war. Not once in his speech did Obama refer to the people of Iraq, only to "our sacrifices." America's tragic losses during the past decade are real and must be remembered. They cannot be understood and so cannot be properly remembered, however, apart from the staggering losses of Iraqis as a consequence of U.S. actions. The just-war tradition requires that we think and speak not only about the sacrifices of our own nation or tribe but about the global common good and the sufferings of the Other whom we bear responsibility for.

"We will be relentless in defense of our citizens and our friends and allies," the president continued. "We will be true to the values that make us who we are. . . . Justice has been done." It has been suggested, however, that the intelligence that led to bin Laden's whereabouts may have been gathered, at least in part, through "enhanced interrogation techniques" authorized by the Bush administration. Whether or not this proves true, the final lesson Americans might well take from Obama's words—"Justice has been done"—is that the ends justify the means, that all of the crimes of state committed during the past ten years were somehow worth it because this one man is finally dead.

But the just-war requirement of mourning even for our enemies means that we must see bin Laden's death with a clear sense of proportionality. It is hard in this light to maintain that his killing signifies that justice has been done. A narrowly legitimate or justifiable use of force might still be part of a fundamentally unjust pattern of violence. And the language of justice can itself be a great injustice when it is used in ways that induce or perpetuate historical amnesia.

Reinhold Niebuhr, reflecting the long Christian tradition of deep ambivalence about "just war" (even as he vigorously defended it), declared that "our own sin is always partly the cause of the sins against which we must contend." There was, unfortunately, no acknowledgment in Obama's speech of America's role as a contributing agent in the evils against which we must now contend. This should come as no surprise, for in the final analysis U.S. foreign policy is not based on the Christian vision of the causes of violence and injustice. Christianity has powerfully shaped American political life and the grammars of just war and human rights in liberal societies. But the relationship of the American story to the Christian *euangelion* is in many ways one of violent parody.

This was also evident in Obama's speech. The president appealed to the nation to unite around the killing of bin Laden as "a testament to the greatness of our country and the determination of the American people." We "are once again reminded," he said, "that America can do whatever we set our mind to." We "can do these things not just because of wealth or power"—as political realists tell us—"but because of who we are: one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." From the perspective of the Hebrew prophetic tradition and the witness of the New Testament writers that Christ has overcome the "principalities and powers" through his nonviolent suffering and death at the hands of the empire, what are we to make of these stark assertions of America's might and American exceptionalism? . . .

Was the killing of bin Laden a legitimate action? Most Americans have already concluded that it was. For those Christians who

subscribe to just-war precepts, however, perhaps the most difficult requirement of the tradition is the demand that we mourn rather than celebrate the deaths of our foes, and that the occasion of killing be one of moral introspection rather than of unbridled enthusiasm or unexamined joy among those who claim justice for their side. Martin Luther King Jr. was speaking in the spirit of both authentic just-war thinking and Christian militant nonviolence when he reminded Americans of the "courageous maladjustment" of Jesus in commanding his followers to love their enemies.

I feel no love for Osama bin Laden. But Christian mourning for bin Laden requires not a feeling of grief at his passing, nor simply refraining from cheering in the streets. What it demands now is that we refuse to script his death into any myth of redemptive violence, into any nationalistic narrative of the regenerative power of blood sacrifice, whether of fallen soldiers or of those who would do us harm.

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Brain

David A. Hogue

Twenty-five years ago I was taking a required class in neuropsychology. We had been introduced to the amazing structure and functions of the brain. During the very last class session, exams completed, we students were relaxed, and by then had enough basic information to ask interesting questions. "Are feelings and thoughts really different from each other?" "What happens when emotions interfere with reason?" "What happens in the brain when we fall in love?" The professor graciously fielded these questions, offered answers when he could, and acknowledged the limits of science.

Finally, I ventured a question about religion. "What happens to the brain during a religious experience?" There was a pause while the professor considered his response, and one student sitting immediately behind me muttered under his breath, "That one's easy. The brain shuts down."

The comment was irreverent, if not funny. His implication was clear: religion requires the short-circuiting of rational thought, and intelligent people do not engage in that sort of thing. The professor, who later admitted to me that his mother had wanted him to be a rabbi, did not hear the comment, and preceded to talk excitedly about some then very recent research designed to answer just that question.

In the years since I first asked that question, a cascade of discoveries from the neurosciences has touched on virtually every facet of human life, including religion. We have learned, for instance, that in certain religious

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experiences particular brain structures do indeed shut down—or more precisely, input to and output from those structures decreases while it increases in others. Experiences such as the loosening of boundaries around the self, loss of spatial orientation, and deeply felt connections with others and, with God, can be described in part by neurological processes.

In hindsight, that course prompted a kind of conversion experience for me. In some deep way, the psychology and theology I had been studying for years found an embodied ground, what former colleague and pastoral theologian Jim Ashbrook called an "anchoring metaphor." This research trajectory has shaped not only my work, but my understandings of people (including myself), relationships, and spirituality. Four clusters of thought have particularly influenced me: embodiment, memory and imagination, a theory of change, and the social nature of brains and bodies.

Embodiment

The religious and cultural traditions in which I grew up valued thinking and moral reasoning over emotion and the body. The body was not merely neglected—it was distrusted. The psychotherapeutic systems of the day claimed to privilege feelings, but the most common treatment was a "talking cure." Words *still* won out over bodily experience.

Today the brain sciences are underscoring the rootedness of human experience in flesh-and-blood bodies, and the utter dependence of our conscious experience on the intricate workings of living brains and acting, feeling bodies. The mind-body dualisms of the past are crumbling; we are unitary beings—soul, mind, and body. We are learning that thinking without feeling is often misguided at best and destructive at worst.

The religious practices of my Protestant upbringing valued speaking and reading over doing and feeling. Word inevitably won out over Sacrament. The neurosciences have awakened in me a deep appreciation of our need to ritualize, to act and perform in ways that both shape and express our deepest religious and social commitments. Rather than using words to crowd out or contain the ineffable, the unspoken (or unspeakable) is gaining a rightful place alongside the spoken. Gesture, posture, and movement have become meaningful, as has the power of the symbolic—cross, Table, and Font. Instead of distrusting "empty rituals," an unfortunate legacy of the Reformation, I am increasingly convinced of the religious power of experiences beyond our words.

Stories and Memory

One of my early forays into the neurosciences was a desire to understand more fully how we remember, since stories and memories are the very "stuff" of education and pastoral care. I had generally thought of memories as packets of facts, or YouTube videos, locked away in "file cabinets" in the brain, awaiting recall as needed. All we had to do was locate the right file and open it. Some memories are more difficult to recall, of course, but remembering required unlocking files. I learned, instead, that the brain records ("encodes") memories by distributing pieces all over the brain (e.g., images in the visual cortex, sounds in the auditory cortex) and "re-collecting" those pieces every time we recall them. And memories can change any time we recall them. Memories

(my own and others') now seem much more dynamic and fluid, influenced by how we feel while we are remembering as well as by what we were experiencing when recording the memory.

Stories have become more important to me. We know that human beings are storytellers; we are learning that telling stories also grows out of our neurobiology. Our brains automatically construct narratives to make sense of our experiences, even when we do not have all the "facts." Some scientists even argue that our autobiographical stories are complete fiction, fooling us into thinking we are making rational choices, when we are merely explaining our actions to ourselves after the fact.

I am much less skeptical than those scientists about human agency and responsibility. We do make choices, and we are accountable. Nevertheless, I listen more carefully to the sub-texts of stories, including my own, and ponder how some small shift might change those stories. I believe that in some ways we can change the past.

Theory of Change

As a teacher and pastoral counselor I now think in very different ways about how people learn and how they heal. Two specific mechanisms of change have particularly intrigued me. Since stories are constructed by a brain that does what it can to make sense of the world, these stories can also change. Increasingly I am listening for the pieces of stories that do not quite fit together, where some missing information might change the story's meaning, or where rearranging the details might provide for a more liberating story. I have a new appreciation for the ways we can deceive ourselves, but also our capacity to reimagine both past and future.

My first readings about *neuroplasticity*, or cortical remapping, deepened my understanding of the ways we change. Scientists have confirmed the capacity of the brain to rewire itself in the face of new experiences or practices. Following injury or disease, the brain is sometimes even able to restore lost functions by recruiting neural networks previously used for other functions. This discovery convinces me that our religious practices, our spiritual disciplines, shape us more deeply than I would have previously thought, and helps me understand why they are called disciplines. Healing of the soul and mind have become embodied processes, underscoring my Christian conviction that our bodies are indeed the temples of the Holy Spirit.

Social Brains

Last but not least, the neurosciences have convinced me of the deeply embodied reality of *love*. Significant recent research is exploring how human brains relate to each other—how we empathize, understand each other's intentions, how we connect. Further studies are illuminating how our brains shape and are shaped by our relationships. The growing consensus is that our needs for connection with others permeate every fiber of our being, particularly those fibers in our brains. Such growing evidence has convinced me that we are made by and for relationships at the core of our biology.

For years I have invested much time and effort in attempts to teach students to empathize, and I will continue to do so. But recognizing that our brains are built to empathize

has shifted how I think about that task. Empathy is not an "add-on," something we have to force ourselves to do, or teach to each other; we are instead building on the brain's inherent relatedness, clearing away obstacles and creating spaces for our brains to do their natural work. Religious education and pastoral care are practices of physical liberation.

Conclusion

Little did I know in that neuropsychology class so long ago that I was embarking on a journey that would shape my psychological and theological understandings so profoundly. I could not have imagined that I would gain such an appreciation for creation, and that my own embodiedness would link me in intimate ways to others, to the world, and to God.

My theological commitments now value and honor the body and the physical world of which it is a part—a marked contrast to the body-neglecting (or denying) theologies of my youth. Participating in liturgies of the church has become more personally meaningful, and my scholarship on the borders of theology and science provides new discoveries and insights nearly every week. My classmate of years ago might be surprised to learn that religious experiences do much more than shut down our brains; for many of us, our faith is invigorated and renewed by understanding the workings of the mind and brain.

"Wading through Many Sorrows": Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective

M. Shawn Copeland

Suffering is universal, an inescapable fact of the human condition; it defies immunities of all kinds.[9] Suffering despoils women and men irrespective of race or tongue, wealth or poverty, learning or virtue; disregards merit or demerit, reward or punishment, honor or corruption. Like sun and rain, suffering comes unbidden to the just and the unjust alike.

Suffering always means pain, disruption, separation, and incompleteness. It can render us powerless and mute, push us to the borders of hopelessness and despair. Suffering can maim, wither, and cripple the heart; or, to quote Howard Thurman, it can be a "spear of frustration transformed into a shaft of light."[10] From some women and men, suffering coaxes real freedom and growth, so much so that Thurman insists we literally see the change: "Into their faces come a subtle radiance and a settled serenity; into their relationships a vital generosity that opens the sealed doors of the heart in all who are encountered along the way."[11] From other women and men, suffering extracts a bitter venom. From still others, suffering squeezes a delicious ironic spirit and tough laughter. Consider the Gullah [woman's] proverb: "Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen and ah licked de pots clean."[12]

A working definition of suffering is the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence. Evil is the negation and deprivation of good; suffering, while never identical with evil, is inseparable from it. Thus, and quite paradoxically, the suffering caused

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by evil can result in interior development and perfection as well as in social and cultural good. African Americans have encountered monstrous evil in chattel slavery and its legacy of virulent institutionalized racism and have been subjected to unspeakable physical, psychological, social, moral, and religious affliction and suffering. Yet, from the anguish of our people rose distinctive religious expression, exquisite music and song, powerful rhetoric and literature, practical invention and creative art. If slavery was the greatest evil, freedom was the greatest good, and women and men struggled, suffered, sacrificed, and endured much to attain it.

This essay is a theological meditation on "the maldistribution, negative quality, enormity, and transgenerational character" of the suffering of black women.[13] Such particularizing of suffering requires neither qualification nor apology. However, there can be no ranking of oppression or suffering; no men or women are excluded from the canon of anguish. Indeed, the historic suffering of the Jewish people and the oppression of the hundreds of thousands of indigenous peoples of the lands of the Americas weigh heavily in any discussion of ethnic suffering.[14] Further, the specificity of this essay neither discounts the humiliating racism black men suffer, nor does it undermine the grievous sexism women of all races and cultures endure. Rather, I hope that the reader shall situate this particularizing of suffering within the ongoing Christian theological effort to respond to the human condition in new and graced ways.

The focus of this essay is not the formal, self-conscious, and bold contemporary articulation of womanist theology for an authentic new world order, but rather its roots in the rich historic soil of black women's experiences of suffering and affliction during the centuries of chattel slavery. In the first section of the essay, enslaved or fugitive black women speak for themselves.[15] Scholars estimate that black women wrote about 12 percent of the total number of extant slave narratives, although none of these is as well known as the narratives by fugitive and emancipated men.[16] Mary Helen Washington observes that male slave narrators often render black women invisible or relegate them to subordinate roles. When black women are referenced in men's narratives, they are depicted as "the pitiable subjects of brutal treatment, or benign nurturers who help the fugitive in his quest for freedom, or objects of sentimentality."[17] Black women slave narrators offer a stiff antidote to the (hegemonic) cultural stereotypes that black men seem to have imbibed. As Hazel Carby points out, when these women relate and interpret their experiences on their own terms, they disclose a very different sense of themselves:

> In the slave narratives written by black women the authors placed in the foreground their active roles as historical agents as opposed to passive subjects; represented as acting their own visions, they are seen to take decisions over their own lives. They document their sufferings and brutal treatment but in a context that is also the story of the resistance of that brutality.[18]

Only by attending to black women's feelings and experiences, understanding and reflection, judgment and evaluation about their situation

can we adequately challenge the stereotypes about black women—especially those stereotypes that coalesce around that "most popular social convention of female sexuality, the 'cult of true womanhood.' "[19]

The centerpiece of this first section is the story of emancipated fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs [Linda Brent], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.[20] Jacobs's controversial narrative is quite likely, "the only slave narrative that takes as its subject the sexual exploitation of female slaves—thus centering on sexual oppression as well as on oppression of race and condition."[21] Here, we apprehend not only the intersection of gender and race and class, but a most excruciating form of the suffering of enslaved black women.

Womanist theology claims the experiences of black women as proper and serious data for theological reflection. Its aim is to elucidate the differentiated range and interconnections of black women's gender, racial-ethnic, cultural, religious, and social (i.e., political, economic, and technological) oppression.[22] Hence, a womanist theology of suffering is rooted in and draws on black women's accounts of pain and anguish, of their individual and collective struggle to grasp and manage, rather than be managed by their suffering. Drawing from these narratives, the second section discusses those resources that support black women's resistance to evil and the third section sketches the basic elements of a theology of suffering from womanist perspective.

Black Women's Experiences of Suffering

Composite narratives and interviews with emancipated men and women, as well as their children and grandchildren, have given us a picture of daily plantation life.[23] These include chronicles of the horrors and anguish they endured under chattel slavery: the auction block with its rupture of familial bonds, the brutalization of human feeling, savage beatings and mutilation, petty cruelty, and chronic deprivation of human physical and psychological needs. But accounts of the rape and sexual abuse of enslaved black women are told reluctantly, if at all. James Curry, after his escape, recounting some of the "extreme cruel[ties] practiced upon [some] plantations" around Person County, North Carolina, asserted "that there is no sin which man [sic] can commit, that those slaveholders are not guilty of." And Curry lamented, "It is not proper to be written; but the treatment of females in slavery is dreadful."[24] Still, some men and women dared to write and speak about that dreadful treatment—the coarse and vulgar seduction, rape, abuse, and concubinage of black women under chattel slavery. . . .

Resources of Womanist Resistance

Almost from its emergence, Christianity has been described as the religion of slaves.[25] Space does not allow me to elaborate here the nature and character of the psychic moments, spiritual experiences, preaching and teaching, rituals of passage and praise, spirituals and shouts and dance, visions and vocations that signify the distinctive African appropriation, if not reception, of biblical revelation by the enslaved Africans in the Americas. From their aural appropriation of the Bible and critical reflection on their own condition, these men and women shaped and "fitted" Christian practices, rituals, and values to their own particular

experiences, religiocultural expectations, and personal needs.[26] The slave community formed a distinctive image of itself and fashioned "an inner world, a scale of values and fixed points of vantage from which to judge the world around them and themselves."[27]

Christian religion was a fundamental resource for womanist resistance. Many women drank from its well, yet selectively *so*. Harriet Jacobs was critical of religious hypocrisy, speaking of the "great difference between Christianity and the religion of the south."[28] Slaveholders who beat, tortured, and sexually harassed slaves prided themselves on church membership. The planter class held one set of morals for white women, another for white men, and assumed that enslaved women and men had little, if any, capacity for real moral experience, moral agency, and moral virtue. All too often, Christian preaching, teaching, and practice complied. Black women's narratives counter these assumptions and stereotypes as well as discern and embrace a religious standard that exposes the moral hypocrisy of the planter class. Moreover, these women are living witnesses to the power of divine grace, not merely to sustain men and women through such evil, but to enable them to turn victimization into Christian triumph.[29] Jacobs records the lines of this old slave hymn that sings the distinction between a pure or true Christianity and that poisoned by slavery: "Ole Satan's church is here below/Up to God's free church I hope to go."

The attitude of the master class toward worship by slaves was not uniform. On some plantations slaves held independent, and sometimes, unsupervised services of worship; on other plantations, they attended white churches, sitting or standing in designated areas; on still others, they were forbidden to worship at all and they were punished if found praying and singing. Yet the people persisted. Christian biblical revelation held out formidable power. It offered the slaves the "dangerous" message of freedom, for indeed, Jesus did come to bring "freedom for the captive and release for those held in economic, social, and political bondage."[30] So it offered them the great and parallel event of Exodus, for indeed, it was for a people's freedom that the Lord God chose, called, and sent Moses. Christian biblical revelation provided the slaves with material for the singular mediation of their pain. The spirituals, "forged of sorrow in the heat of religious fervor,"[31] were an important resource of resistance. In and through these moaned or sung utterances, one woman's, one man's suffering or shout of jubilation became that of a people. The spirituals reshaped and conflated the characters and stories, parables and pericopes, events and miracles of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. These songs told the mercy of God anew and testified to the ways in which the enslaved people met God at the whipping post, on the auction block, in the hush arbor, in the midnight flight to freedom. The maker of the spiritual sang: "God dat lived in Moses' time/Is jus' de same today." The spirituals served as coded messages, signaling the arrival of Moses in the person of Harriet Tubman or other ex-slaves who went back into Egypt to "tell ole Pharaoh, Let My People Go." "Steal away," sang the maker of the spiritual, "the chariot is comin.' " And, if the makers of the spirituals gloried in singing of the cross of Jesus, it was not because they were masochistic and enjoyed suffering. Rather, the enslaved Africans sang because they saw on the rugged wooden planks One

who had endured what was their daily portion. The cross was treasured because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them. The enslaved Africans sang because they saw the result of the cross—triumph over the principalities and powers of death, triumph over evil in this world.

The slaves understood God as the author of freedom, of emancipation, certainly. Harriet Jacobs recalls Aggie, an old slave woman and neighbor to her grandmother. When Aggie hears the other old woman weeping, she hurries to inquire. But, when told that the grandmother is weeping because her grandson has escaped North, Aggie's joy admonishes Jacobs's grandmother.

> Is dat what you's cryin fur? Git down on your knees and bress de Lord! I don't know whar my poor chillern is, and I nebber 'spect to know. You don't know whar poor Linda's gone to; but you do know whar her brudder is. He's in free parts; and dat's de right place. Don't murmur at de Lord's doings, but git down on your knees and tank him for his goodness.[32]

For the slaves, "the God of the fugitive is a God who offers immediate freedom and deliverance to his [sic] chosen people," even if this deliverance sometimes entails trial and fear.[33]

Even as Linda Brent joins in thanks for her brother's safety, she does not hesitate to question God. Brent's experience of oppression forced her "to retain the right, as much as possible, to resist those things within the [dominant] culture and the Bible that [she found] obnoxious or antagonistic to [her] innate sense of identity and to [her] basic instincts for survival."[34] In the following passage, Brent speaks for so many who puzzled and would puzzle at the maldistribution, enormity, viciousness, and recrudescence of this peculiar suffering:

> I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it as part of the price I had paid for the redemption of my children. Sometimes I thought God was a compassionate Father, who would forgive my sins for the sake of my sufferings. At other times, it seemed to me there was no justice or mercy in the divine government. I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth. These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter.[35]

Harriet Jacobs's Linda Brent has made a space for Alice Walker's Celie. Tormented in heart and mind and body, Celie declares that God "act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful, lowdown . . . If he [sic] ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you."[36]

For the enslaved community, memory was a vital and empowering act. Remembering gave the slaves access to "naming, placing, and signifying,"[37] and thus the recovery, the reconstitution of identity, culture, and self. Memory, then, was an essential source of resistance. As a young girl, Lucy Delaney's mother, Polly Berry, was kidnapped from Illinois and sold into slavery. Like Harriet Jacobs, Polly Berry's emancipation is bound up in a slaveholder's will that an executor disregards. Delaney

writes that "my mother registered a solemn vow that her children should not continue in slavery all their lives, and she never spared an opportunity to impress it upon us, that we must get our freedom whenever the chance offered."[38] Delaney's mother kept alive for her children the memory, promise, and possibility of freedom. Fugitive and emancipated slave narrators remember and recall for us, not only their own experiences and suffering, but those of other enslaved women and men as well. Mary Prince explained her own commitment to their memory simply and eloquently: "In telling my own sorrows," she declared, "I cannot pass by those of my fellow-slaves—for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs."[39]

Linda Brent, her grandmother, Mary Prince, and Polly Berry all use language to defend themselves from sexual and physical assault and to gain psychological space and strength. *Language* was a crucial form of resistance. In these narratives, women model audacious behavior: wit, cunning, verbal warfare, and moral courage. These black women *sass! The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* defines sass as impudent or disrespectful back talk. Enslaved black women use sass to guard, regain, and secure self-esteem; to obtain and hold psychological distance; to speak truth; to challenge "the atmosphere of moral ambiguity that surrounds them," and, sometimes, to protect against sexual assault.[40]

Joanne Braxton explores the West African derivation of the word *sass*, noting its association "with the female aspect of the trickster." Sass comes from the bark of the poisonous West African sassy tree. Deconcocted and mixed with certain other barks, sass was used in ritual ordeals to detect witches. If the accused survives the potion, she is absolved; if not, the sass poisons, it kills. For enslaved women, sass is a ready weapon; it allows them to "return a portion of the poison the master has offered."[41] There is strong sass in the lines of a song women cutters sang in the Louisiana cane fields: "Rains come wet me/Sun come dry me/Stay back, boss man/Don't come nigh me."[42] An emancipated slave recalls Sukie, an enslaved black woman who used her fists and sass to protect herself from the sexual assault of a Virginia slave master. In revenge, he sells her to traders who, the narrator reports, " 'zamined her an' pinched her an' den dey open her mouf, an stuck dey fingers in to see how her teeth was. Den Sukie got awful mad, and she pult up her dress an' tole old nigger traders to look an' see if dey could fin' any teef down there."[43] Strong sass!

Linda Brent uses sass to ward off Flint's sexual and psychological attacks. When the physician mocks her marriage plans, calling her fiancé a "puppy," Brent sasses: "If he is a puppy, I am a puppy, for we are both of the negro race. . . . The man you call a puppy never insulted me." Infuriated, Flint strikes her. Brent sasses again: "You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" "Do you know," Flint demands, "that I have a right to do as I like with you—that I can kill you, if I please?" Unbowed, Brent sasses yet again: "You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me." At this, Flint is enraged: "By heavens, girl, you forget yourself too far! Are you mad?"[44] Indeed, sass is Linda Brent's means of physical and psychological resistance. Brent is *not* mad. Of course, thinking that Brent may be mad makes it is easier for Flint to dismiss her behavior—and salvage his ego. Rather, Brent

and her sassing sisters are naming their own standards, claiming their own bodies, their own selves.

An Outline for a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective

It is ironic, perhaps, that a theology of suffering is formed from resources of resistance. It is not womanist perspective that makes it so, but the Christianity of the plantation. In its teaching, theologizing, preaching, and practice, this Christianity sought to bind the slaves to their condition by inculcating caricatures of the cardinal virtues of patience, long-suffering, forbearance, love, faith, and hope. Thus, to distance itself from any form of masochism, even Christian masochism, a theology of suffering in womanist perspective must reevaluate those virtues in light of black women's experiences. Such reevaluation engages a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of resistance; but that reevaluation and reinterpretation must be rooted in a critical realism that rejects both naive realism and idealism as adequate foundations for a theology of suffering.

Chattel slavery disclosed the impoverished idealism that vitiated the Gospels, left Christianity a mere shell of principles and ideals, and obviated the moral and ethical implications of slavery—for master and slave alike. Likewise, a naive Biblicism is impossible: "the Bible has been the most consistent and effective book that those in power have used to restrict and censure the behavior of African American women."[45] Womanist Christian realism eschews naive Biblicism, dogmatic moralism, and idealism distantiated from critical knowledge of experience, of human reality—of black women's reality. Thus, a theology of suffering in womanist perspective begins with the acknowledgment of black women's critical cognitive practice and develops through their distinctive Christian response to suffering.

Recalling her father's stories of slavery, Ruth Shays reflected: "The mind of the man and the mind of the woman is the same. But this business of living makes women use their minds in ways that men don't even have to think about. . . . it is life that makes all these differences, not nature."[46] As a mode of critical consciousness and emancipatory struggle, black women's critical cognitive practice is glimpsed in the earliest actuated meanings of resistance by captured and enslaved African women in North America. This practice emerged even more radically in the patterned operations of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulating, reflecting, marshaling and weighing the evidence, judging, deliberating, evaluating, and deciding, speaking, writing. As a mode of critical self-consciousness, black women's cognitive practice emphasizes the dialectic between oppression, conscious reflection on the experience of that oppression, and activism to resist and change it. The matrix of domination is responsive to human agency: the struggle of black women suggests that there is choice and power to act—and to do so mindfully, artfully.[47]

A theology of suffering in womanist perspective grows in the dark soil of the African American religious tradition and is intimate with the root paradigms of African American culture, in general, and African American women's culture, in particular. Such a theology of suffering attends critically and carefully to the differentiated range of black women's

experiences. It holds itself accountable to black women's self-understandings, self-judgment, and self-evaluation.

- A theology of suffering in womanist perspective repels every tendency toward any *ersatz* spiritualization of evil and suffering, of pain and oppression. Such a theology of suffering seeks, on behalf of the African American community whose lives and struggles it honors and serves, to understand and to clarify the meaning of the liberating Word and deed of God in Jesus of Nazareth for all women and men who strive against the principalities and structures, the powers and forces of evil. A theology of suffering in womanist perspective is characterized by remembering and retelling, by resisting, by redeeming.
- A theology of suffering in womanist perspective remembers and retells the lives and sufferings of those who "came through" and those who have "gone on to glory land." This remembering honors the sufferings of the ancestors, known and unknown, victims of chattel slavery and its living legacy. As Karen Holloway indicates, this "telling . . . is testimony that recenters the spirits of women, mythic and ancestral, into places where their passionate articulation assures them that neither geography nor history can separate them from the integrity of the essential Word."[48] And that "recentering" revives the living as well. Black women remember and draw strength in their own anguish from hearing and imitating the strategies adopted by their mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, great-great-grandmothers to handle their suffering. These stories evoke growth and change, proper outrage and dissatisfaction, and enlarge black women's moral horizon and choices.
- A theology of suffering in womanist perspective is *redemptive*. In their narratives, black women invite God to partner them in the redemption of black people. They make meaning of their suffering. Over and over again, black women under chattel slavery endured pain, privation, and injury; risked their very lives, for the sake of the lives and freedom of their children. Praying in her garret, Linda Brent offers her suffering as part of the price of the emancipation of her children. Mattie Jackson recounts that during their escape, her mother fasted for two days, saving what food she had been able to carry away for Mattie and her sister. And, by their very suffering and privation, black women under chattel slavery freed the cross of Christ. Their steadfast commitment honored that cross and the One who died for all and redeemed it from Christianity's vulgar misuse.
- A theology of suffering in womanist perspective is *resistant*. With motherwit, courage, sometimes their fists, and most often sass, black women resisted the degradation of chattel slavery. Sass gave black women a weapon of self-defense. With sass, black women defined themselves and dismantled the images that had been used to control and demean them. With sass, black women turned back the shame that others tried to put

> on them. With sass, black women survived, even triumphed over emotional and psychic assault.

Moreover, in their resistance, black women's suffering redefined caricatured Christian virtues. Because of the lives and suffering of black women held in chattel slavery—the meanings of forbearance, long-suffering, patience, love, hope, and faith can never again be ideologized. Because of the rape, seduction, and concubinage of black women under chattel slavery, chastity or virginity begs new meaning.

Harriet Jacobs's sexual liaison with Mr. Sands causes her great remorse and she experiences a loss of self-esteem. Indeed, for Jacobs, this spiritual and existential agony shadows the remainder of her life. A theology of suffering in womanist perspective ought offer her comfort: Does not the sacrifice of her virgin body shield and preserve the virginity of her spirit and her heart? And, of what importance is a virgin body if the spirit and heart are violated, raped, crushed? And can we not hope that in the life of death, Harriet Jacobs has found "god in [her]self and loves her/loves her fiercely?"[49]