

Womanist Theology

Part Three: Sarah and Hagar

STM Advent/Epiphany Series
led by D. White

Womanist Theology: Emilie Townes

- Womanist theology employs materials by and about Black foremothers as resources for contemporary reflection that provide a conscious background for God-talk.
- Rather than assume the universal claims of traditional theologies, womanist theology acknowledges that all theological reflection is limited by human cultural, social, and historical contexts. These limits are not negative, but merely representative of our humanity.

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- Rather than restrict, these limits can serve as a challenge to explore the particular ways in which any group having similar characteristics (e.g., age, denomination, ethnicity, sexuality) experiences divine activity in life.
- These differing perspectives need not ultimately separate but can enrich us as we acknowledge the limits of what we know in listening to the voices of others.

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- Ultimately, womanist theology points us to the largeness of God and the various ways in which human beings often seek to confine God.
- Dr. Townes goes on to elaborate about the contributions of the Rev. Dr. Katie G. Cannon in developing the overarching framework for womanist liberation ethics.

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- Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988) establishes the overarching framework for womanist liberation ethics.
- She draws on the work of writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston to argue that Black women's literary tradition is the best literary source for understanding Black women's social and religious experiences.
- Cannon uses an interdisciplinary approach that includes ethics, history, literary studies, and political economy in a systematic analysis of class, race, and sex.

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- Her aim is to show that Black women's moral agency is different than the White male norm (dominant ethics) due to the existence of the triple oppressions of class, race, and sex.
- In dominant ethics, the freedom of choice is assumed. Cannon argues that no such assumption can be made for those in situations of oppression.
- By its very nature and dynamic, oppression limits the options of the oppressed so that a desirable norm in dominant ethics such as frugality is a necessary reality for poor Black women. In making this argument, Cannon clearly distinguishes womanist ethics from dominant ethics.

Additional readings

- ***Just emotions: Reading the Sarah and Hagar narrative (Genesis 16, 21) through the lens of human dignity***, Juliana Claassens. (An article in which she references a number of articles and books in this short but profound paper.)
- ***Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible***, Alice Ogden Bellis (a book by a professor at Howard University Divinity School)
- ***Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels***, Frances Taylor Gench (a book by a professor at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond).