A COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF WOMANIST AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE

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My interest in this subject was sparked by the challenging comment of a black woman with whom I shared a class at Northern Baptist Seminary. In the course of our conversations I expressed my growing understanding that racism and sexism were two issues that needed to be dealt with together in the Christian community. More specifically, I asked her how a Caucasian like myself could help to facilitate a greater coming together of black and white women (along with interested men) to work for justice in these matters. Her only comment was, “You don’t even know what the issues are for black women.”

My friend’s comment was not made maliciously and I did not take it that way. Rather, I felt grateful for her honesty because it challenged me to be more proactive in seeking situations that would stretch me in this regard, such as enrollment in this particular seminary class. In addition, her comment fostered within me a desire to listen more deeply to the experiences of black women. For me, this kind of listening would be a prerequisite to the forming of any kind of common bond, be it for the purpose of friendship or working together for a common cause. My thesis is that white women and black women have much to offer one another in terms of the wisdom that comes from the differing experiences that fuel their theological journeys.

Even though I realize that all white women are not feminists and all black women are not womanists, I will use the word womanist interchangeably with black woman and the word feminist interchangeably with white woman solely for the purposes of this paper. Through openhearted listening, my hope is that feminists and womanists can understand their differences and move beyond those differences to become “yoke-fellows” (Philippians 4:3) — those whose lives are bound together for the common mission of spreading the good news of equality for women and men of all races and classes.

UNDERSTANDING OUR DIFFERENCES

The most glaring difference between the theological quest of white women and black women is the fact that black women are dealing with three levels of oppression (racism, sexism, and classism) while the white women’s struggle with oppression can be one dimensional: fighting the Victorian model of the weak (even pampered) woman who can’t do anything for herself. In contrast, the black woman is coming from the experience of being “the mule of the world”. This has led many black women to feel that feminism is a white middle class movement and therefore irrelevant to the black woman’s situation.

Diana Hayes points out that the differences lie not only in their race-based experiences but also in the consequences that black and white women face as a result of the stands that they take: “The feminist movement, both in society and within the Christian churches, has been one of white women—usually educated, middle-class women—with the freedom and privilege to become militant without fearing consequences as harsh as a woman of color or lower-class white woman would be subject to.”

An excellent caricature of this was the Walt Disney movie “Mary Poppins”, where although Mrs. Banks was a leader in the suffragette movement during the day, her activism really had no effect on the rest of her life. Her husband and children tolerated her involvement as long as it didn’t affect them. When her husband came home at night, she reverted to a subservient role in which her banker husband was the undisputed king of the castle. Unlike the life and death struggle for survival in which the black woman has been engaged, Mrs. Banks’ fight for women’s voting rights was only the diversion of a wealthy woman with little else to do in life. So even such a light-hearted movie reveals the truth of Frances Beale’s comment that “very few of these (middle-class white) women suffer the extreme economic exploitation that most black women are subject to every day. This is the factor that is most crucial for us. It is not an intellectual persecution alone; it is not in intellectual outburst for us; it is quite real.”

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Given these factors, it is easy to see why womanists separate themselves from white feminists (including biblical feminists) who ignore the problem of racism.

Another difference between feminists and womanists is in the area of relationality in the liberation struggle. A major component of the definition of womanist is an orientation to justice over-all, a commitment to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. "Many black people today see the white feminist movement as an attempt to divide black people. Contemporary black feminists caution against espousing the more ‘radical’ white feminist stances because these stances leave out, as irrelevant, black men, black children, black families. Consequently, a primary moral value for black people is articulated in this overarching and enduring black feminist position: solidarity among black people is essential for survival."

Consequently, black women often feel torn between their loyalty to their racial community and their need to struggle against sexism.

Many feminists, on the other hand, have often demonstrated a hatred or at least a lack of respect for men, and, at times, a deplorable lack of concern for the well-being of children and families. Even if black women did not need to maintain solidarity with black men in their struggle against racial oppression, the womanists are right and biblical in refusing passively to follow any secular feminist pressure to minimize the importance of gender reconciliation as benefiting the whole community.

There are several other differences between womanist and feminist theology/experience that are not so much points of disagreement but rather differing emphases that add to the richness of theological understanding. We do well to be aware of and sensitive to these issues.

One of these is the emphasis in womanist theology on a spirituality of survival. Whereas Christian feminists tend to look to Bible women such as Deborah, Hulda, Abigail, Esther, and Sarah as role models of "liberated women" who found the freedom to be all that God wanted them to be, the experiences of black women have caused them to resonate more with women like Hagar, and also with the Exodus story from the perspective of the two midwives, Pharaoh’s daughter, and Moses’ sister and mother. Womanists affirm the day-to-day struggle for survival that they see in such stories and, according to Delores Williams, this spirituality of survival informs their hermeneutical approach:

"My womanist reading of [the story of Hagar] sees God as responding to the African slave Hagar and her child in terms of survival strategies...God’s promise to Hagar throughout her story is one of survival (of her progeny) and not liberation. When they and their families get into serious social and economic straits, Black Christian women have believed that God helps them make a way out of no way."

This is a very different "way of seeing" than white feminists, many of whom do not have to worry about their literal survival.

Two additional nuances that womanists bring to theology that are different from feminists are emphases on embracing womanhood and also female sexuality. In contrast, many feminists have at times tried to distance themselves from anything feminine. Early in the fight for gender equality, it seemed to many white women that it was necessary to become “token males” or “one of the guys” by downplaying any of the things that would make women seem different from men, i.e. showing emotion concern for children, the roundness of their bodies, or their bonds with other women. (This parallels the black experience of feeling it necessary to identify with everything white so as to gain greater acceptance.) However, the tendency to distance themselves from anything distinctly feminine is now changing among some feminists. This could be due, in part at least, to the womanist emphasis on “sisterhood” as this concept begins to find its way into feminist thinking.

UNDERSTANDING OUR SIMILARITIES

While the differences between feminist and womanist experience and theology are significant, I believe that the similarities are even more powerful. As Renita Weems states so eloquently:

"At some time in all our lives, whether we are black or white, we are all Hagar’s daughters. When our backs are up against a wall; when we feel abandoned, when we find ourselves in need of another woman’s help; we, like Hagar, are in need of a woman who will ‘sister’ us, not exploit us.

In those times we are frequently just a sister away from our healing. We need a woman, a sister, who will see in our destitution a jagged image of what one day could be her own story. We need a sister whose genuine mercy—not pity which is episodic, random, and moody—is steadfast, consistent, and free."

This is the understanding I would like to encourage by elaborating on some of the similarities between womanist and feminist theology and the common experiences from which these similarities are born.
Even though there can be vast differences in the status and outlook of blacks and whites, many women still “share a common condition of dependency, secondary existence, domestic labor, sexual exploitation, and the projection of their role in procreation into a total definition of their existence.” This common experience has sent both black and white women alike back to tradition, back to Scripture, back to God to discover what it is that God really has to say about women. Many share the experience of “knowing” that what they were hearing from the church and from theologians about their race, gender or both was not right, before they could actually prove it in any kind of an academic way. Recognizing this disharmony is another way of “knowing” that women have learned to trust.

The most powerful thing that womanists and feminists have in common is the process that women have had to go through in claiming the freedom women have in Christ. Understanding, claiming and learning to live out the theological truths that are so well stated in Galatians 3:28 are very similar whether one is dealing with race or gender. In 1971, William E. Cross developed a model of stages that black people go through in their search for a new identity as equals with whites. Dr. Emma Justes presented these stages in her class on Pastoral Care of Women as being comparable to the stages that women go through in their quest for a truer identity. I was amazed at the similarities between the experiences of blacks with racism and my own experiences with sexism. (Cross published his stages again in an essay in 1980 and that is the source I am working from.) I present them briefly here to demonstrate that womanists and feminists do have much in common from which they could build mutually beneficial relationships and theological discussions.

The first stage in Cross’s model is the pre-encounter stage which describes the nature of the old identity or frame of reference to be changed. At this stage, a black person is not aware that anything is wrong and accepts the place that society defines for him or her. There is an acceptance of racism and segregation without challenging them and an attempt at times to even fit in with white, euro-American ways. For a woman, this stage is one of accepting the traditional roles carved out for her and she interprets the Scripture to endorse society’s view. She sees the male as being superior even though she is probably not aware of this on a conscious level. Low self-esteem is a part of this stage since what is valued most (male superiority) is something that is very different from who a woman knows herself to be.

The second stage is the encounter stage which involves “a shocking personal or social event that totally dislodges the person from his old world view, making the person receptive (even vulnerable) to a new interpretation of this identity and his condition.” The encounter creates the sudden realization that one’s humanity has been assaulted. Rosa Park’s refusal to go to the back of the bus was just such an encounter experience, not only for herself as an individual but also for our entire country. Indeed, her experience helped spark the civil rights movement.

For other women, encounter experiences might be realizing that they are getting paid less than male colleagues, the experience of being barred from the pulpit, or having to get a husband’s signature on the loan papers to buy a car. Any one or a series of such events can bring on all sorts of new awareness and can initiate a “frantic, determined, extremely obsessive, motivated search for a new identity.”

This frantic search throws one into the immersion-emersion stage when one is consumed with the new identity and everything relating to that. Everything else (be it white-ness for the black or male-ness for a woman) is repudiated. It is a stage of separatism that is characterized by a tendency to be confrontational, self-centered, and angry. While the first phase of this stage includes immersion and withdrawal, it does begin to level off after a while and the person becomes capable of a little more openness and critical analysis. The strengths and weaknesses of blackness (or femaleness) can be sorted and there is more control. The most difficult period has come to an end and the person moves on to the stage of internalization. There is a “resolution of conflicts between the old and the new. Tension, emotionality, and defensiveness are replaced by a calm, secure demeanor. Ideological flexibility, psychological openness, and self-confidence are evident in one’s interactions.” The person is able to shift his or her focus to others.

At this point there is the possibility of one final stage: internalization-commitment. A person may choose to be satisfied with having come to personal peace and discontinue any outward active involvement in fighting for justice in these areas. Or, the person may decide that the self must become involved or continue to be involved in the resolution of problems shared by the group.
Even though Cross uses these stages to describe a black person's growth to psychological maturity, I have gone through every one of these stages myself as a white woman trying to serve God in male-dominated church. Since this has been one of the most significant growth processes of my life and I assume the same would be true for black women, we can share an important point of inter-racial commonality from which to work and have theological discussion.

Understanding these stages in a person's search for identity has caused me to be wide open to listening and interacting with the experiences and teachings of my black sisters. I am trusting that this understanding might have a similar impact on them.

THE CHALLENGES WE FACE

Womanists and feminists who would like to come together in mutually beneficial relationships face several challenges. First of all, white feminists have a responsibility to listen to the perspective of black women on women's issues and analyze how racist social structures might impact those issues. White feminists must realize that black women have been forced to perform labor and take risks that few white women have been called upon to do, either in the name of religious traditions or on behalf of the survival of their race. This difference presents white feminists with the challenge of giving "explicit attention to the ways in which they are involved in race and class privilege...for it is only this group of women [white feminists] whose only problem is the problem of being women, since in every other way, they belong to ruling class." This reality will require white feminists to stand with their black sisters and contribute their resources in the fight against poverty and economic exploitation. White women must not assume that their experiences are universal.

The challenge for the womanist is to resist the urge to stay separatist and thus contribute to a continued polarization between white and black women. As Letty Russell learned at a conference for Third World theologians, "there was a point at which we all could come together to hear one another into speech and action, and that was the point of pain. The theology we did together became a liberation theology as we discovered our own marginalization or cross as a result of our commitment to oppressed people. In suffering there is not only solidarity with the people, there is also empowerment...".

It is in understanding and being enriched by our differences, sharing in the passions we have in common, and facing the challenges together, that we will all get where we need to go: to a world where equality of women and men of all races, classes, and ages is not only an accepted theological concept but is an experiential reality in both secular society and the priesthood of all believers.

End Notes

3 Ibid., p.312.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p.86

Bibliography